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RETIROEMENT  
PLAN

THE GREATEST  
MAGICMASTER'S

7



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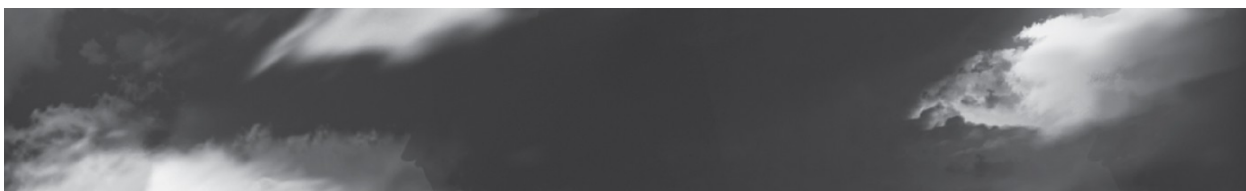
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

# C O N T E N T S

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## **Thirty-Seventh Chapter**

### **An Ominous Silence**

A calamity was secretly taking place at the same time as the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament.

It was a Fiend known as a Devourer that absorbed mana at a frightening speed. Its existence posed an unprecedented danger that would influence humanity's continued survival.

In order to deal with this, an elite force from Alpha was dispatched to the Outer World beyond Balmes' borders.

Despite their wealth of experience, the familiar Outer World had transformed into an unpredictable battlefield. And they made their way into the dangerous area where a terrifying foe awaited.

And now... Alus, Lettie and the squad were watching a red ocean of flames turn what was once a green forest into ash.

The perfected spell exceeded human knowledge, and overpowered any laws of physics. Moreover, it was two Singles, the elite of the elites—those who stood at the top of hundreds of thousands of Magicmasters—who had cast the spell. Its power and scale were at the very peak of magic.

Detonation—the widespread annihilation spell—was so powerful that there were restrictions on its use.

Aside from the common magic used in everyday life, the spells used by Magicmasters were classified as novice, intermediate, advanced, and expert. But there were actually also exceptions that were classified as ultimate spells. These presented a degree of perfection that required all kinds of factors to be incorporated. They were at the limit of what humans could use and the closest to what Fiends used.

When it came to destructive power alone, Detonation was on the level of ultimate magic, leaving the other spells behind. As it turned its surroundings into ash, it continued to swallow everything in its flames.

In the blink of an eye—the fires had spread farther and devoured all in its sight.

The flames were merciless and indiscriminate. The air got so hot it even reached Alus and the others, and heated their faces.

One of the squad members showed consideration by casting a barrier to shut out the heat. The magic membrane resembling frosted glass had a red tinge to it, as the flames wavered on behind it.

The double cast of Detonation by Alus and Lettie also created a powerful shockwave. The shockwave shook the trees and sent the leaves flying. Of course, the trees couldn't survive that kind of blast either. If viewed from above, the trees were surely falling on top of one another like dominoes.

The wind blew in, bringing with it a smell of greenery as well as the burning.



Lettie gazed at the never-ending fire with satisfaction. But Alus scowled and muttered, "As expected, I fall behind someone who specializes in it."

Lettie had an affinity for the fire attribute and specialized in explosive magic. So her talent and abilities excelled in this kind of spell. Because of this, even though Alus outranked her, he wasn't going to beat her in her own field. Even though they'd used the same spell, Alus' sharp senses had picked up that her ability was slightly above his own.

Yet Lettie turned and gave him a wry smile. "If anything, my pride is in tatters. They were practically on the same level. How strong are you planning to get?!"

"Like you're one to talk. Thanks to you, we've got a wasteland in front of us." Perhaps he should take Lettie's words as praise. When it came to this field, surpassing her would be difficult.

After this brief display of overwhelming firepower, Alus spoke up to bring the light mood to an end. "Well, no matter. More importantly... Next move!"

The spells had been fired at some suspicious people assumed to be Magicmasters. And as expected—that wouldn't be enough to kill them.

Alus had used his sixth sense to confirm that a defensive film had been created around their target. That film was pretty much a massive sphere of some kind, and in better conditions it probably could have been seen from where they were.

*It was only really meant to keep them in check, but it doesn't look like they had a lot of trouble blocking it. Without letting his astonishment show, he ordered the second assault to begin.*

"I've been waiting for those words, Captain!" Sajik said with vigor.

"We're ready on our end," Mujir added.

Next to Sajik was a lightning beast that easily surpassed him in height. Some distance away, Mujir had a poisonous serpent known as a Hydra floating in the air near him.

At first glance they looked like Fiends, but they were actually summoned creatures made manifest through Sajik's and Mujir's mana.

At Alus' signal—the two thrust out their hands.

Having been given its orders, the lightning beast skillfully jumped over a grove of trees and transformed into electricity to close in on its target in the blink of an eye.

Meanwhile, the serpent wriggled its way through the trees.

Both moved at high speeds, showing no signs of being stopped by the obstacles in their way. The two could use advanced summoning magic, and the lightning beast and serpent were exceptionally powerful summoned creatures.

Alus had known they were elites, but he was honestly surprised that Sajik and Mujir could control them while giving the other members orders. "One more for good measure... Fire!"

The next moment, the remaining squad members fired spells up into the sky. None of them were too powerful out of fear that they would cancel each other out, but the idea was to crush the enemy through sheer numbers. And the magic rained down on the target with perfect accuracy.

However, a loud roar then made the very air tremble. Despite their distance from it, it reached Alus and the others, shaking the atmosphere around them.

"What happened?!" Lettie asked.

"The magic was canceled out..." Alus said. He scanned his memories for possible spells. A spell that could cancel out spells and create a shockwave that shook the air narrowed it down quite a bit.

*He felt a headache come on, as he realized the spell name that matched the criteria. So it's Kurama after all. They're a bigger pain than I thought. To think they can even use taboos... no, spells banned from regular use.*

The spell Alus had remembered was barely used, but it was slightly different from a taboo. It had terrific power, but it canceled out even the spells of one's allies. Because of that, it was viewed as being pointless in group battles and its name had been expunged from the spell encyclopedia.

In reality, even Alus had only seen its name before. In the past he'd received permission to look through the full database of all spells ever listed in the spell encyclopedia, and it had only faintly remained in his memory.

However, the squad members were all exchanging dumbfounded looks. And who could blame them? Alus aside, they probably had no idea what had happened.

Lettie, representing the group, asked him, "Whatcha mean? I don't know how the enemy managed to fight back that rain of spells."

"I guess you could call it a spell that destroys spells... at any rate, it's a spell suitable for a criminal."

Everyone apart from Lettie wasn't sure if they got it or not, but Alus felt he'd explained it well enough.

*Now then... what to do next.* This opponent had survived Detonation and canceled a rain of spells. There must be someone strong even in Kurama among them. If they quarreled with them now, they'd waste mana, which would lead to having to abandon their elimination of the Devourer.

"So the enemy's really Kurama then. If they can block Detonation, I guess it's not all lies that they can rival Singles. But... we don't get a lot of chances to fight someone on our level," Lettie said with a fearless smile.

*She's quite the battle junkie herself.* Alus sighed, staring at her coldly. He didn't think she'd do something stupid, but he decided to reconfirm their objective with her anyway. "Just so you know, we're not fighting them now. If they come biting back at us that's one thing, but the Devourer's our top priority. If not, we're going to see a pile of bodies."

"Yeah, no, I get that." Lettie feigned laughter, as if to say it was all a joke, but Alus saw the curiosity and fighting spirit in her eyes. It was like her heart was burning with the wish to fight a strong enemy.

"If you just have to fight them, go put in a request with the Governor-General. Though he'll probably say no," Alus added. No sane person would send a Single off on other errands in a situation like this, at least not as long as it was a joint operation between nations, which this was.

In the middle of their idle talk, Alus suddenly felt his body being pressured. It wasn't something as vague as an intuition. It was something clearly approaching from afar—and rapidly.

"—!" A beat later, Lettie also noticed the large mass of mana flying their way.

The squad members were making a ruckus too. Beyond the trees was an overwhelming presence of mana coming at them. Considering the scale, it was obviously a counterattack from Kurama.

*I guess I could refill the mana I spent on Detonation.* Unlike the squad members, who were bracing themselves, Alus stepped to the front and held out his hand. "I'll deal with it," he said, sheathing his AWR, as he wasn't going to need it.

Seeing Alus put away his AWR, everyone looked at him with suspicion. Yet they still put their trust in him.

Lettie took a step back to give him room, and watch over things.

*Considering the Fiend's class, I'm going to have to end up using it, and they'll probably find out then anyway.*

Alus' special ability was a mana that ate mana. This was considered confidential information, but everyone here was a soldier from Alpha.

Moreover, it was inevitable in this situation. So Alus decided to use it here, since it was only a matter of time anyway before they all found out. Of course, he'd only show the result of the absorption; he wouldn't explain how it worked. On top of that, he was planning to recover the mana he'd expended before.

While his special ability was powerful and useful, it had a complicated drawback. Since the mana had a will of its own, allowing it to absorb too much would force him to focus more on keeping it from going out of control. But if he used it just to absorb the amount of mana he'd put out before, then it shouldn't be a problem.

Alus held his hand out, as a massive slash of wind approached. The wind blade cut through trees and branches with ease, but the moment it touched Alus' hand, it was sucked in. Its power was stripped away, and all that remained was a gentle wind that caressed the tips of his fingers.







With a satisfied look, Alus focused on the mana he had absorbed. *Talk about putting stupid amounts of mana into it. But thanks to that, I got more than I expected*, he thought sarcastically to himself, as the amount of mana put into the attack exceeded what he'd thought was coming.

As a result, Alus' thrust-out arm hadn't been able to fully resist the mana's force, and ended up being pushed back a little. However, he continued to absorb the mana as he pulled his hand away, finally killing the momentum.

"—!! W-What was that?!"

Seeing Lettie react as he expected, Alus sighed as if nothing had happened. "It's a trade secret... but I was able to refill my mana with that."

"It's a spell that can absorb mana?!"

Absorb it did, but it was fundamentally different from what Lettie was thinking—because this ability devoured mana out of its own avarice.

Of course, Alus wasn't going to reveal the principles behind it, so he welcomed Lettie and the squad's misunderstanding.

With that in mind, he confirmed what the enemy was doing once more. He and the others were here to eliminate the Devourer. And with this, their opponent should have a grasp of his and the others' abilities as well.

Their primary goal wasn't to square off against Kurama. And if possible, Alus wanted to avoid any further fighting.

"Well, it seems that settled it." Perhaps the enemy had decided the same thing as him, as their presence suddenly disappeared from the area. Distance-wise, they were just barely out of Alus' sight. Any farther than that was in the realm of spotters, but using magical means to detect them would make him see unnecessary things as well.

He lost any remaining interest in them, and calmly walked over to Rinne, who was crouching down on the ground. There was tension in her expression and beads of sweat on her forehead. Seeing that her eyes were still closed, Alus concluded that she likely hadn't recovered her full sight yet.

Coming to her side, Alus bent down and whispered, "Please keep what you just sensed a secret. I'm not a big fan of getting rough." He held his finger in front of his mouth.

She wasn't able to see his gesture, but since she was called Alpha's Eye, she must have picked up on it all the same.

In fact, it was very likely that Rinne had learned more details of Alus' special ability than the others had. It was only for a moment, but she specialized in sensing the movement of mana. It would be difficult for Singles like Lettie to pick up on it, but Rinne was a different matter.

There would be no misunderstanding as with Lettie, and Rinne likely already understood that Alus' ability differed from mere absorption. Which led right to Alus' secret.

"I-I understand."

Alus gave the nodding Rinne a small smile, then turned his eyes elsewhere. "We lost some time because of this unexpected incident, but let's return to our elimination as pla—"

Before he could finish saying his piece, something came upon him from behind at high speed.

He took a few steps forward, managing to stay upright. He could also feel something soft on his back. Alus could clearly feel two mounds changing their shape as they were pushed against him. As his mind began imagining what they were, he decided to quit thinking for the time being.

"Ahaha! That's Allie for you! There's no one who could take that No. 1 rank from you!"

"Hey!"

"You're so strong, and you've still got tricks up your sleeve. I knew I was right about you." Lettie had her arms wrapped around his neck, her moist eyes fixed on him. Alus wondered just what she was so happy about. "Maybe your big sis really will try to make a move on you!"

"Leave that for later! We're still on a mission."

"You're so stubborn... Being so stiff is only gonna work against you. My motto is to be happy when something good happens, whether it's on a mission or not."

"I've never heard anything like that..." Alus looked over to the squad for help, but they simply shook their heads with no intention of intervening.

If anything... "Please give her a break, Sir Alus," Mujir said with a wry smile. "Our captain's been on edge since the whole Vanalis campaign."

"Yeah, at times I seriously thought she would be crying for you whenever something happened," Sajik added, stroking his chin with a grin.

The other squad members nodded in agreement. As they did, Lettie, who'd been rubbing her cheek against the back of Alus' head, suddenly twitched and stopped.

The next moment, Lettie looked around resolutely. "You're gonna bring that up now?! When we get back to Vanalis, you're going straight to the frontlines!" she said, staring at the two men who'd blabbed a little too much. Her anger-filled expression had enough intensity to make one think she was letting her mana flow freely.

Faced with that pressure, the two men were unable to excuse themselves as merely jesting. Mujir even timidly pointed to himself and asked, "Huh? You mean me?" He only received a cold nod for his trouble.

"... Or do you have a problem with that?" Lettie asked in an ice-cold tone, prompting the two to rapidly shake their heads and gulp as they straightened their postures.

The other squad members looked at them the same way, but that was just to avoid getting caught up in Lettie's rage.

"Well! We've got Allie to help us out this time. Right?" she said, in hopes of hearing him agree, but Alus kept quiet instead.

The squad members weren't sure if they should honestly rejoice at that or not. Having powerful reinforcements was something to be happy about, but they didn't want to step on the same kind of land mine as the other two.

Lettie looked over her subordinates. "I guess keeping this up any further will set a bad example for the rest," she said, letting go of Alus with a smile.

Alus thought it was way too late for that, but didn't say anything.

Once she was fully off of him, Lettie removed the ring on her right hand and slowly handed it over to him.

He showed a dubious expression for a moment over her inexplicable action.

Lettie, as if unsure of his reaction, rubbed her ring finger with a lonely expression. She then pointed at it, as if to ask him to put it on. It was a very dramatic action, but he more or less understood that she wanted him to put it back on her ring finger.

Alus tended to be pretty dense about these kinds of things, but he felt he would be pulled into a situation he couldn't get out of so easily if he went along with it. The surrounding squad members were watching them with tense expressions, as if they were here as witnesses. He could also see a faint red color on Lettie's cheeks.

After thinking for a moment, Alus carelessly threw back Lettie's ring-shaped AWR to her. He'd managed to escape one kind of dilemma, but he wanted to focus on the mission first. As captain, he needed to hurriedly decide on their plan going forward.

And so he forcibly brought them back on topic. "Ms. Rinne, how are your eyes?"

"Ah, yes! It will still take some time." She still seemed to be thinking about his special ability, as she answered in a stiff tone.

Anyway, they didn't have any time to waste. Heading straight for their destination was likely the best option. They were roughly halfway there, so in a while the mineral deposit should come into view.

A little while later...

It was still before noon, and the sun shone down on them through the leaves and branches of the big trees, casting spots of light here and there on the ground. Because of the countless trees, the area felt dark overall, and somewhat cold. So in that sense, it was a good thing they had their cloaks. Though it was still too early for winter, there were no signs of Fiends, let alone critters, around them.

Alus wasn't the only one who felt something was wrong with the unnatural silence. The squad members were also sensing something ominous. They'd gone with Lettie on long missions in the Outer World. Be it fickle weather, strange plants, or uniquely evolved ecosystems, they were elites who weren't going to flinch over something minor. But even they felt danger in the air in this abnormal atmosphere.



They all unconsciously recalled past experiences, and realized they were about to encounter something. Moreover, the past experiences they were remembering were all ominous ones.

This quiet brought to mind a certain silence that appeared at specific times. In other words, when a high-classed Fiend began taking control of an area and slaughtering the weaker Fiends around.

The reasons varied from cannibalizing, to evolving, to stress from outside Fiends messing with their territory. The only sure thing was that in that state, the high-ranking Fiend was anything but tolerant. If anything, they turned mad as they attempted to kill anything that moved. And the silence covering this area was very similar to that.

Alus, taking point, suddenly stopped, signaling the squad behind him with his hand.

There was a massive rocky mountain in the far distance. He jumped up to a branch of a tall tree to take a look.

In the sea of green was an unnaturally placed bulge. The strangely colored soil stood out from the greenery around it. That bulge was unmistakably the deposit they were headed to.

At first glance it looked like a mountain, but it just didn't blend in with its surroundings, giving off an unnatural appearance. If one had to describe it, they might say it was like a giant mountain had been buried with only the top sticking out of the dirt.

Alus wasn't exactly an expert on mineral deposits, but to him, it still looked strange. The uniquely colored peak was like the tip of an iceberg, as if there was way more beneath the surface.

However, he hadn't stopped the squad because he'd spotted the deposit. The main reason was... "There was a battle here."

"Looks like it," Lettie said. "But..."

"Yeah, the traces get more extreme the farther up ahead."

There was a thick smell of blood in the air even now. Considering how much time had passed, the scent of blood should have been long gone. But as they continued on, the farther they went the more stained the ground was with blood. It was so dark it could be mistaken for shadows.

As veteran Magicmasters, they didn't underestimate the Outer World. But this scene was completely different from the greenery they'd been moving through just a moment ago.

Spotting a patch of blood on a nearby leaf, Alus rubbed it with his finger. This was likely the work of magic, and the mowed-down shrubs and severely damaged trees spoke volumes as to how intense the battle had been.

But from Alus' point of view, the battle traces seemed to lack any clear intentions behind them. "This is all over the place. Was there no chain of command? For all I know, they might have ended up killing each other."

They had to have been extremely disoriented. There were multiple traces of Magicmasters firing off magic in all directions.

"This is a little ways away from the deposit, huh?"

Lettie was right. According to the information they had, Balmes' extermination force had encountered the Devourer right next to the deposit.

"That doesn't change the fact that this is from the extermination force. Maybe they fell back and regrouped, and attempted a counterattack from here. At any rate, there was clearly a battle here."

"So they couldn't run away," Lettie said. "But still... the scale's pretty small. Is this all the resistance 400 Magicmasters could manage...? That can't be it. They must have been reduced to a small number before this. I bet there were only around 20 left at this point."

The 400 Magicmaster-strong force was routed, and they were still only able to get this far, all the while being whittled down to less than a company. He didn't want to think Lettie's conjecture was correct, but... just looking at the traces of this battle, Alus could more or less get a grasp of the situation.

Even if Balmes' Magicmasters weren't elites, they should have been relatively powerful. Not to mention that there had been 400 of them. If they had chosen to retreat from this dangerous situation, there should have been at least several dozen who made it back. And yet only one actually managed to return...

Regardless, the truth was up ahead. "We'll find out once we get farther up," Alus said, but he was anything but optimistic.

"Sir Alus, my sight has almost fully recovered. I can use my eyes any moment now," Rinne called out to him, informing him that she was fine, as she blinked a couple of times.

"Ms. Rinne, please don't push yourself... is what I'd like to say, but that won't fly right now. So please go ahead."

"As you wish. I will fulfill my job as a spotter!"

They should be on the border of their target's territory. So Rinne's eye would be a godsend. Or rather, without it they would likely surrender the upper hand to their foe.

That said, her powers weren't at their best yet. As proof of that, Rinne shook her head after failing to spot the Devourer despite her attempts to detect it.

But her face was pale, as if she'd seen something disgusting. Alus could more or less guess what it was, and decided not to ask any questions as they carefully moved on. They'd soon see what Rinne saw for themselves.

It was a hard-to-describe scene... had there been any incidents where this many people had lost their lives in recent years?

"Allie! ... Isn't this even worse than expected?" Lettie frowned. When faced with this sight, she couldn't keep herself from asking this.

It was like a scene right out of hell, completely separate from the world of green they'd just been in, with far more blood than before staining the ground, dyeing everything a sinister dark shade of red.

The undergrowth and bark of the trees around them were all colored red. But even then there wasn't a single corpse to be found. Only the vast amounts of blood told them what gruesome things had happened here.

"We already expected the worst. This just means we were right," Alus said. Indeed, things had turned out to be the worst case scenario as he'd anticipated.

Still, it was an intense scene. And one's steps grew heavier just walking through it. He also found himself impressed that the second force had actually continued on from here.

"Captain! Over here."

Looking in the direction he was called from, Alus saw Sajik with an imprudent, proud expression, staring at a certain spot. He'd heard Sajik had a good nose, but it felt like a waste of time confirming the truth.

"These are scratches... and they're still fresh," Alus noted. The bark of the tree Sajik was pointing out had scratches left behind by four claws.

It was high enough that he had to turn his head up to see it. This was definitely left behind by a very large Fiend, but was it really made by their target? ... No, considering the situation, if there was another Fiend here it would have to be a very high-classed one. After all, any weak Fiends should have already been destroyed by their target. It would have to be something not so easily killed, not to mention there had been talk of six A-class Fiends, so it might have been one of those.

Of course, there was also the possibility that it was the Devourer.

"It's too early to tell. But still..." Seeing how high up the marks were, Alus thought it was more likely that the claws had simply touched the bark rather than being used for an attack. "At that height, it must be at least five meters."

That lent credibility to Lettie's earlier claim that the Devourer might be an ogre after all. Either way, this wasn't enough for him to classify the Fiend, but knowing its shape and type would help in making plans.

He thought about giving Sajik some praise, but seeing him practically boasting to the others, he lost the urge and turned his back on him. He thought he heard a disappointed voice behind him, but it must have been his imagination.

Well, he could praise him once everything was over, anyways. Alus didn't know how rewards were divided up in Lettie's squad, but there shouldn't be any problem with adding something extra. Either way, it wasn't something he had to think about now.

Just after that thought crossed his mind...

"Sir Alus!"

"What is it, Ms. Rinne?"

Looking her way, he could see Rinne pressing against one of her eyes. It was less than a kilometer to the deposit, but the way she was pressing her eye was like narrowing a telescope lens when using her magic eye. This way, she could perceive distant scenes with greater clarity.

Rinne sounded shaken, but had a somewhat relieved expression. "There's someone about 200 meters ahead. He or she appears to be different from the enemies before. It might be a Magicmaster dispatched by Balmes."

"I see..."

"It's been two months since the extermination force went out, if they're from that. I don't think they'd have the time to lie around. They're probably already..." Lettie said.

"T-The thing is, they're breathing," Rinne observed.

"—!! How'd they survive?" Lettie exclaimed. "This place isn't safe this close to the deposit either!"

The squad began to make a stir at the shocking revelation. "Captain, we should hurry over there. If they're breathing, they can still be saved. We can rely on the forces behind us," said one member.

"Hey! Quiet down!" Mujir silenced the squad members with a shout, after seeing Alus' pondering expression.

Silence fell. Everyone held their breath as they waited for the captain's decision.

Alus realized this was a very abnormal situation. But abandoning the person here could prove to be a blunder later on, and it wasn't like he was cruel. If they could save them, then they should do so.

*However, he felt an unease that he couldn't dispel. That made him cautious. It's way too suspicious no matter how you look at it. It's very possible that it's a trap, too... If I was alone I could just ignore it, but Cicelnia has a finger in this, so there's a political aspect to it.*

Alus couldn't help but wish that Fiends were all dumber than animals. There were higher-classed Fiends that could conceal themselves and lay traps when hunting, but that was mostly just primal instincts. They didn't have human intelligence, so they stopped at targeting weak prey and luring them in.

But what ran through Alus' head was the incident with Godma Barhong. Back then, Godma had transformed after taking in the flesh and blood of a Fiend. Humans almost never transformed into Fiends, but it wasn't impossible. And when Godma turned—he had maintained his intelligence.

He was ultimately unable to fight the Fiend's urges in the end, but maybe it was possible to do the opposite, have Fiends devour humans and take on their appearance.

Anything could happen in the Outer World. And Fiends constantly evolved just like humans did.

Alus sighed and scratched the back of his head. "For the time being, let's get close enough to get a look at him. Depending on the situation, we might have to consider abandoning him."

Nobody raised any objections at his decision, but some held their breath as if to brace themselves. They were up against a powerful foe that might be beyond even an S-class, even a simple miss would come at a great cost.



"But before that... it appears the Consensors won't work up ahead." As Alus said that, the squad members all focused on their ears.

The next moment, everyone's expressions distorted at the strange noises they heard.

"The noise is definitely awful. Is this an effect of the deposit?" Lettie asked.

Alus nodded. The minerals in the deposit must have been throwing mana wavelengths out of order. They'd lose contact with the ones behind them, but they'd been told about this ahead of time so there shouldn't be any confusion. "Make sure you don't get too far apart. We'll approach on high alert in a tight formation until we get in visual range." Rinne would still be in the center, but they would be on guard for anything now.

They slowed their pace and moved in a way so as not to make any sound, and before long there was even more blood around them. And it wasn't just the amount; the blood was drier, showing that even more time had passed. It was clear that they were closing in on the site of the main forces battle.

Eventually, Alus and the others arrived at their destination while staying out of sight. As they peeked through the leaves, they saw a single man plopped down on the ground.

The ground around him was stained black. That was because of all the blood that had dried out. The undergrowth around it, equally stained in blood, looked withered.

The man was slumped over and his legs were carelessly strewn about, and he looked dead.

Rinne said, "I can't sense any Fiends around him, but looking at him... something's strange."

Both Alus and Lettie nodded at her words.

"Sir Alus, as far as I can tell, this is the place that saw the most intense battle."

"Yeah, there really is no reason for him to still be here. If he survived the battle, he would have been eaten long ago anyways," Lettie noted.

"It's certainly strange for a Devourer," Alus said. "He's still alive, right? I can't see any wounds from here. So the blood on the ground can't be his own."

"So maybe it really is a trap."

Yet according to Rinne, there were no Fiends lying in wait. It was hard to imagine one noticing them and laying a trap to lure them in.

Alus gave orders to the squad members through Lettie to stay on guard. Lettie raised her hand to convey it to the others.

"At the moment, we have nothing to go on..." Alus said.

"Wanna go for it?" Lettie replied.

In the Outer World, wasting time was foolish. Swift decisions were required. They were already in Fiend territory so they couldn't take the time to hold a strategy meeting.

If Alus couldn't come to a decision, there was always the option of abandoning him, but as the captain, he'd be asked to take responsibility afterwards. He supposed he could get away with an excuse if he had everyone get their stories straight, but that was a wasteful use of time and effort.

It was nothing but a pain. When Alus turned back and gave Lettie a signal with his eyes, she got down on all fours and crept closer.

"Who told you to come over like that?"

"We'll be noticed if we're not quiet. Now then, let's get a closer look at this mystery corpse." She crawled up to Alus' side and poked her face out from over his shoulder to look at the man up ahead. The next moment, her eyes opened wide and she whispered into Alus' ear, "Ah, there's no doubt! That's Duncal right there!!"

Everyone knew about Balmes' ranked No. 9, Duncal Konzer. He had been in charge of carrying out this mission. Even Alus remembered Jean bringing up that name during the rulers conference.

But this inexplicable situation wasn't going to get any better just because they knew his name. If anything, if they were to abandon a Single—Singles being treasured by humanity—they would lose a lot of trust.

Alus could only smile wryly.

## Thirty-Eighth Chapter

### Dazzling Battlefield

*Going back in time to just after the Friendship Magical Tournament ended...*

On the same day Alus and the others arrived in Balmes, at a hotel near the tournament venue, a closing party that was also meant to serve as a social gathering was being held. It was traditional for the winning institute's hotel to be the location for this party.

Students wearing their uniforms or suitable party clothes were in attendance in the hotel ballroom. Unfortunately, this wasn't simply a place to recognize the participants' efforts and for the novice Magicmasters to make connections. It was also a recruitment site for various nations to try and scout the high achievers and bring them over to their nations after graduation.

There was plenty of food on the tables, but the participants from the top three institutes, especially the best performers, never got a chance to touch it with all the people flooding around them.

Equally troubling were the weakest institutes, whose participants didn't so much as receive a glance from anyone. This was pretty much a tournament custom, and not something that had just started this time around.

"I never thought it'd get this busy..." In the ballroom, Tesfia, who'd managed to free herself from the crowds, grumbled wearily. She'd done her best to maintain the appearance of a noble lady, but that was all gone now, as she squeezed the bridge of her nose to ease her mental exhaustion.

All the girls at the party were wearing dresses they'd brought themselves, or ones provided to them by the hotel. Tesfia and Alice were no exception, having been dressed to stand out. "Closing party" might be what it was called, but it looked more like a fashion show than anything.

Coming to a sudden realization, Tesfia looked around the ballroom. Eventually she spotted a pressured-looking Alice surrounded by a large crowd.

Both of them had earned a lot of attention for their performances in the tournament. They'd agreed to stay together as much as possible in order for them to get through the anticipated chaos, but...

Reality didn't go as planned, and they were torn apart as they were forced to go through standard greetings and receive praise from the crowds of people.

Alice seemed to be in distress, but she was doing her best to deal with the crowd and stave them off.

Suddenly, Tesfia locked eyes with Alice. They'd promised to help each other out, but as soon as she took a step towards her—

"Excuse me, may I have a moment of your time?" A soft-spoken man stood in her way. From the air around him and his appearance, she judged him to be in his thirties and likely a Magicmaster.

As she looked him over, Tesfia put her hand to her mouth. "Ah! Could you be one of the Magicmasters from the demonstration?!"

The man in front of her smiled bitterly. "Yes, Clevideet's representative. Though Alpha's Ulhava stole the spotlight."

"Aha ha ha..."

Ulhava was a mysterious, masked Magicmaster. Tesfia had been told it was actually Alus behind the mask, and she struggled to answer, trying to awkwardly laugh it off. She couldn't say that it was only natural seeing as how he was the current ranked No. 1. He'd disguised himself and participated in the demonstration, ultimately stealing the attention from Clevideet's representative.

She hadn't seen much from the spectator seats, but now she saw he had the characteristic appearance of a veteran Magicmaster. His formal attire couldn't fully hide his well-toned muscles, and his perfectly economical movements spoke volumes of his experience.

However, this party was mainly for the student participants, so he was the only magic demonstration participant she'd seen here so far.

Regardless, he was Clevideet's representative, and she couldn't treat him carelessly. Wearing a sociable smile, Tesfia interacted with him in a friendly manner.

Frankly, it was a little overwhelming, but she didn't let it show. She also wondered what someone representing a nation would want with her. She was aware that she'd shown quite a big presence in the tournament. The expectation that maybe this man highly valued her strength filled her chest.

It was hard to imagine him being a scout from another nation, with Tesfia being from the Fable family, which had deep ties to Alpha... especially in a public place like this. Because of that, she had expected that recruitment was unlikely... but this marked the seventeenth person she'd spoken to tonight.

Tesfia dealt with him as normal, making casual talk, but something unexpected happened. Unlike before, it appeared this man had come to her knowing that she was from the Fable family. When she brought up the Fable name, he didn't so much as flinch, merely saying to her, "We'll need to consult with your mother first."

Maybe he was just taking a wild shot, hoping for the best, or perhaps he'd decided to do what he could because of how highly he valued her. Either way, Tesfia decided that this was going to take some time, so she looked over to Alice, bringing her hands together in front of her face in apology.

Gazing around the venue, she could see Ciel, who'd made it through the fourth round, being stopped a couple of times as well. She shrank back in fear even more than Alice, and was constantly bowing her head.

*Then what about them*, Tesfia thought, scanning the crowd.

While she'd technically won, those who'd seen the other match would know that Tesfia wasn't the true champion; she'd simply had the honor handed to her as there was no opponent to fight.

Alpha's Second Magical Institute was set up in the center of the ballroom, with runner-up Rusalca's First Magical Institute set up next to them.

In the middle of the biggest crowd there was Fillic, who hadn't shown himself since his match with Loki, entertaining the adults.

Tesfia could tell that he was handling them with ease, well-versed in this kind of thing. *He thoroughly puts on a mask for others...*

A glass in his hand, he had a cheerful expression, with seemingly no ulterior motive, acting the model image of a noble. And that kind of ticked her off.







"Excuse me... Ms. Fable?"

"Huh, ah, yes!" Remembering that she was in the middle of a conversation with Clevideet's Magicmaster, Tesfia realized her blunder.

"So, I'd like to put your talents to use in my squad. I'm a Double Digit, you see," he said, pulling his license from his chest pocket, along with a small piece of paper that he touched. As he did, a holographic profile popped up, the equivalent of a business card.

The first thing to enter Tesfia's sight was his name, Rowan Welts. Like he said, he was a Double Digit.

"My! It is an honor to speak with you. But I think someone as weak as myself would only hold everyone back..." Tesfia put her hand in front of her mouth and feigned surprise, before turning her face down, speaking with modesty.

He was so enthusiastic that turning him down without engaging with him at all would bring her dignity into question, though she did feel bad for stringing him along...

When she first enrolled at the Institute, meeting a Double Digit would've had a major impact on her, but thanks to a certain someone, she had started to react less to these things.

From what he told her, Rowan was well known in Clevideet, and in charge of a newly formed squad. So he wanted to get promising members, even if it meant being a little unreasonable. "Oh, that's not true. I saw your match in the semi-finals, and it seems you are quite accustomed to battle. Of course, you wouldn't join the squad until after you graduate, but I'd prepare times for you to train during some of your vacations. And if possible, I would love to welcome your friend, Ms. Alice Tilake, in as well."

He did give off the atmosphere of someone who could become a competent captain, but it didn't feel like he was used to it yet. He had a good way with words for someone on the frontlines of the Outer World, and he carried his rank with dignity. Overall, he left a good impression.

But having seen Alus in action, Tesfia thought he felt a little unreliable. She had no intentions of joining in the first place, but she was secretly surprised to learn that Rowan had investigated her circle of friends. "I am nothing but grateful to hear you say that. It is truly a welcome offer. I can't make any decisions on my own without consulting my family first... not to mention I am still just a first-year, so I think it's a little too early to decide just yet. It hurts to say it, but I am still just an immature and shallow student. I would like to take my time to consider my future."

The man hadn't flinched at the Fable family name, but having said this much, he finally backed down. "I-I see... then I suppose it can't be helped. It appears I got a little ahead of myself. Instead, I will see if I can find an opportunity to speak with you again next year."

"Thank you very much. I am truly sorry to have taken up your time."

Tesfia bowed with a forced smile, but Rowan held up his hands in a grateful gesture. "Oh no, it's nothing to apologize for. I look forward to the next time we meet, Ms. Tesfia Fable. Once again, my name is Rowan Welts, and it would be an honor if you could remember it until next year."

"Yes, I will."

With a joyful look upon seeing Tesfia's smile, Rowan excused himself and headed straight for Alice.

Tesfia was a little exasperated as she saw him swiftly move away. Alice had only just parted ways with a person who was hoping to scout her. When she turned to look at Tesfia, she let out a yelp of surprise upon finding that Rowan was waiting for her.

Having seen that, Tesfia shrugged, and gently turned around. As she did, she found that a line had formed for her. They all had licenses and holographic business cards in hand, clearly being after the same thing as Rowan.

Tesfia's cheeks twitched for a moment, and then she pulled herself together to keep the mask of a noble lady on for a while longer.

It was a series of battles without a break.

Once things finally settled down, Tesfia looked around the ballroom before her eyes suddenly stopped at a certain point. She'd found Loki standing in the rest area.

Unfortunately, there was no one with the person who'd gathered the most attention. She'd been exhausted after her battle with Fillic, but had recovered astoundingly fast, and now she didn't even need a wheelchair to get around.

In reality, people had swarmed around Loki at the beginning of the party. But Loki rebuffed the solicitors by saying, "I am already someone's partner, and I have no intention of accepting any invites."

With no openings they could use, the scouts simply gave their greetings and scattered. After that, nobody paid her any visits.

Actually, a couple of participants from various institutes had stopped by to greet her, but Loki maintained a sour look.

After two hours had passed, an announcement went out, and military personnel who were there to recruit left, and other important individuals from the various nations came in.

It was the beginning of the second party. There was an unspoken agreement that this social gathering was also used by noble society as a place to find a spouse for their children or blood relatives.

Military personnel from good families, as in those from the nobility or something equal to it, were permitted to stay as well. That said, blatant scouting was not allowed.

Before long, a lot of ladies in beautiful dresses began to appear. But the tournament participants were still the stars of the show, so their outfits

weren't too flashy—though they still spoke of their familial and social standings.

In the midst of this, Tesfia, trying to catch her breath, walked over to a table to get a drink. While she was there, she thought of getting one for Alice as well, and glanced over at her best friend.

She saw that Alice looked dismayed, with her forced smile about to break down. A man appeared to be persistently hounding her. Pure military personnel like Rowan had left, so something like this was quite unusual. The voice of the man speaking to Alice was loud and overbearing. And it seemed like he was attempting to recruit her, despite the ban.

The man was probably a noble in a military position, but the party had changed hands with the other military personnel having cleared out to let the nobility enter. This was clearly ill-mannered, and Alice looked defeated, as she was curling up like she was being scolded.

Tesfia exclaimed, "What's up with him? Can't he at least show a bare minimum amount of courtesy..."

And it wasn't just Tesfia either. The people around began making a stir as the attention of the ballroom fell on Alice and the man.

"Do you not understand the manners expected of you here? What nation are you from? What is your rank and affiliation?"

Suddenly a woman's calm voice interrupted. It was a quiet, clear voice, but there was a smattering of anger tinged with ridicule, as if calling the man's character into question.

But even then, the man didn't leave Alice's side. "Excuse me, but we haven't finished speaking yet. Please hold on a moment... That's why, Alice..." The man, wearing round glasses and with a head of hair starting to turn gray, didn't so much as turn around as he continued, "I would love nothing more than to examine your AWR, and if you could tell me who made it..."

The woman in a red dress standing behind the prattling man let out a grand sigh. "You're not from Alpha, I hope. I wouldn't want to think we have trash like this around... Selva."

"Understood." The elderly man dressed as a butler behind her stepped forward, standing between Alice and the man in glasses. "Pardon me, but I believe you should save this talk for later. If you push this any further we may have to confirm your identity in front of everyone."

Faced with the elderly butler—Selva—and his sharp glance, the man shrank back. Selva had retired from battle, but putting enough killing intent in his glare to make an amateur flinch was child's play for him. Nowadays, he'd stopped pushing his body beyond its limits, but his experience in dealing with all kinds of people in underground society wasn't just for show.

"N-No, I just...!! I-I understand... Excuse me, Alice." Overwhelmed by Selva, the man apologized to Alice, and then looked over at the woman who'd interrupted and stumbled for words once more. "Y-You're...!"

"M-Mother—!!" Tesfia let out a yelp of surprise at the same time.

Indeed, standing in front of the man in glasses, and wearing a chilling, angry expression, was the head of the Fable family, one of the major nobles of Alpha... Frose Fable herself.

Not only was she a major noble, but she'd had great achievements in the military as well, and her name was still well known, even after retiring.

The man in glasses opened his eyes wide, then gave her a deep bow and rushed out of the ballroom.

Frose turned her back on the man she'd been glaring at and let out an exasperated sigh. "How truly hopeless."

"Indeed, Master Frose."

"It's unfortunate that you had to deal with someone like that, Alice." In the blink of an eye, Frose's expression softened into a smile directed at Alice.

"Lady Frose!! T-Thank you very much."

"It's fine. Actually, it pains me to hear my daughter's best friend add a 'Lady' onto my name... I know, why not just call me Mother? You are kind of like a daughter to me, after all."

Frose might have been saying it jokingly, but even the carefree Alice found that a little too high of a hurdle. While she was acquainted with Frose, it wasn't like she was at the Fable family home all the time.

"U-Uhm... would Ms. Frose be good enough?" she asked timidly, recalling a certain time at the Fable mansion. Before they'd enrolled at the Institute, Alice had been invited to the Fable mansion for the first time. And for some reason, she'd been roped into Frose's strict training alongside Tesfia.

"I understand. I suppose that will do for now." Frose showed a somewhat sad expression. That made it even more difficult to tell if she'd been serious or not. Either way, to her it was probably just a simple greeting.

"That aside, why are you here, Mother?" Tesfia asked. But she hadn't stopped to consider her question, as she realized the answer before she even finished speaking.

Frose was here, as promised by Alus, to see if her daughter had grown enough under Alus' teachings to be permitted to stay at the Institute. She was here to judge her daughter's possibilities.

Tesfia broke out in a cold sweat, but Frose just smiled at her. "Why, I was here to cheer you on, of course. Congratulations on winning, Fia. And Alice, it was a wonderful match."

"T-Thank you very much, Mother."

"It's an honor, Ms. Frose."

Even as she hurriedly thanked her mother, Tesfia couldn't help but find it unexpected. While her mother had a reputation to uphold, she was surprised to hear her praise her in public. Though at the same time it also made her happy. It was hard to imagine that attitude from Frose in the past, as she'd maintained her military dignity even after finishing her service.

Standing in front of Tesfia now was a mother rejoicing in her daughter's victory. Moreover, Frose was exceedingly satisfied. The effects of Alus' teachings were more pronounced than expected, and her daughter had grown even more since she'd told Frose how she really felt about training with Alus. She could even take pride in her.

At first, Frose wasn't sure if she could honestly be happy, but Selva had given her the push she needed by saying, "I'm sure the young miss worked very hard," prompting her to leave any unnecessary thoughts aside and give her daughter honest compliments. Though her real objective was something else.

Tesfia looked at her mother with a complicated expression, and Frose understood that her daughter wanted an answer.

Frose's desire was for Tesfia to find a fiancé and settle down, to focus on studying to become the next head of the family. Those were her true feelings. Without exceptional talent, she wasn't going to get far as a Magicmaster. So Frose believed that putting down a path for her daughter to follow was for her own good. There was no value in pointless effort.

*... Or at least that was the original plan. But it seems that he is full of surprises.*

By *he*, Frose of course meant that young man. She had no intention of ignoring Tesfia's victory in the first-year division. And she would naturally acknowledge all of the efforts that she had put into it.

At the same time, her growth had far exceeded Frose's expectations, making her question if it would be a mistake to pull her daughter out of the Institute.

Most of all, there was the move that Tesfia had used at the end of her battle with Alice. She had indeed shown her Zepel once in the past. But that was when she was much younger and hadn't even begun learning magic.

That said, Zepel was just another step on the way to the Fable family's secret technique. It was simply the next step after Icicle Sword. However, it had taken Frose three years to acquire that spell, and she'd ultimately given up hope of evolving it to the final form. Even with all her talent, sense, and effort, it lay in a realm beyond her abilities.

In reality, it was said that no head of the Fable family had been able to perfect its final form. Learning Icicle Sword was demanded of all heads in the family, but there was no one who had yet mastered the true hidden technique.

Perhaps it was only theoretically possible—only a pipe dream. In that sense, Frose hadn't become the true head of the Fable family.

*I haven't been able to see it. But perhaps Fia will... but he will be necessary for it.*

Frose found herself smiling at the vision that popped into her head. A realistic path to fulfill both her daughter's wish and the continuation of the Fable family had appeared before her.



As anticipation filled her chest, imagining her ideal future, Frose suddenly realized that she'd kept her daughter waiting. "Fia, regarding your resignation from the Institute..."

"Yes?" Tesfia anxiously waited for her mother's following words. Her voice trembled, and Alice noticed this as she worriedly fell silent.

"I won't pull you out of the Institute for the time being. Continue your training, and don't slack on studying either."

"—!! Mother, are you serious?!" The moment she heard that, Tesfia's face filled with joy, as she was released from her worry. But she suddenly realized something and decided to ask. "... You're not going to take it back later, are you?"

"No, I will wait until you graduate at least. We can talk about your future after that."

"Yes! Thank you very much, Mother!" Tesfia's side tail flew up and down as she bowed.

"Isn't that great, Fia?"

"Yeah, thanks for helping with the training and stuff, Alice!"

There was more joy in their expressions now than during the tournament. In the midst of their celebration, Frose continued, "However, I have a condition. Until your graduation, you are to receive proper guidance from Mr. Alus."

"I-I understand." Tesfia stumbled slightly over her words, as she busily nodded her head.

From what she'd heard from the principal, Alus would likely continue to teach them until graduation: in other words, for as long as they remained classmates. It was a bit of a selfish hope, but the thought of it made her happy—yet embarrassed. Seeing as how he was teaching them now, though, she had no reason to refuse.

"You make sure to have him teach you too," Frose said to Alice.

"A-Alright." Alice nodded with a tense expression.

Seeing that, Frose started thinking again. As he'd promised in Sisty's office, Alus had shown off Tesfia's possibilities. So he probably wasn't going to wash his hands of Tesfia later, but... "Fia, I'd like to give Mr. Alus my greetings too. Where is he? It seems he stepped down from the finals... is he not feeling well?"

"—!! Ah, well, uhm, no... Al had some business to attend to..." Tesfia was clearly shaken. But all she really knew was that Alus' business was a mission, so there was nothing more to say.

"I see. That's a shame. I was wondering why he didn't appear in the finals." Frose maintained a calm appearance, but she was secretly disappointed. While she didn't say it out loud, she'd come to this party to see Alus again. This would've been the perfect chance to estimate his hidden abilities.

Actually—considering Selva’s appraisal and Lettie’s tone when they’d talked, it was easy to imagine his abilities far exceeding those of a student. Frose just wanted to see it for herself up close.

Alus had advanced up to the point of facing Rusalca’s Fillic. And from what she could tell, Fillic would have provided the ideal opportunity to judge Alus’ true strength. His matches up until then had ended in the blink of an eye, making it impossible to get a good grasp on his power.

But it wasn’t a complete waste. Loki had ended up coming out victorious against Fillic. And Frose had already found out that Loki was Alus’ partner, her abilities far surpassing Frose’s expectations.

Being partners, she should be below him. And Loki had defeated Rusalca’s ace, stirring up Frose’s interest in Alus even more. But ultimately, she hadn’t found out anything. “Then please let him know that I will contact him some other day.”

“I understand. I’ll let Al know,” Tesfia told her.

This wasn’t the kind of talk for a celebratory party, so Frose shelved it for later. “By the way, Alice, that man from before... it didn’t sound like he was trying to recruit you.”

“Ah, yes! He said he was from Rusalca’s military technical department. He wanted to examine my AWR...”

“How unusual. Is it really that much of a gem? After leaving the military, I’m afraid I’m not very up to date on the latest AWRs. It was a spear type, wasn’t it? Where did you get your hands on that?”

“...! A-Ah, uhm... a-actually, Al made that... he said it was for my birthday, so I couldn’t refuse...” It seemed Alice was incapable of lying to Frose and she ended up speaking the truth. She felt guilty that whenever she opened her mouth, it seemed she would let even more of Alus’ secrets slip.

“—!! I see. And you didn’t want to bring up his name. But still, it seems that engineers from all nations stop noticing their surroundings once their curiosity is sparked.”

“A-Actually, let me take that back! It’s not fair of me to bring up his name...” Alice suddenly tried to smooth things over after it was already too late.

“Mother, I’d like to ask you the same thing. He doesn’t really like it when you pry into his personal life...” Tesfia imagined an unhappy Alus, and asked this of her mother alongside Alice.

Frose nodded, as if agreeing that she’d keep it to herself. But still... she felt like the information she’d gathered before had received some proper support. Not only was his Magicmaster career unusual, but it appeared that his name was behind the latest magic technologies.

Likewise, in the field of new magic. When newly developed spells were listed in the spell encyclopedia, the creator’s name would always be listed next to it. But that wasn’t actually a rule that was set in stone. As proof of

that, in the past few years, there were several new spells where the creator's name had been left blank.

That blank space seemed to indicate that the person was well known in researcher circles. And the name that filled that blank was Alus Reigin.

Frose had come here to see Tesfia, but also because she'd looked into Alus. Still, to think a student would be able to create an AWR that would capture the interest of an engineer from Rusalca when they were at the top of the AWR market...

She thought back to the golden spear that Alice had used in the tournament. "That AWR of yours was pretty interesting, and that spell you used wasn't an existing light element spell, was it?"

"Y-Yes. Actually... he made that... too."

"Is that so..." Frose narrowed her eyes, and her lips curled up into a smile. The creation of new spells required putting together a research team and launching a large-scale project. Most of them were funded by the military. So a single person doing the same was questionable at best. Even Frose found that to be unrealistic.

Yet the tone of her daughter's friend had easily confirmed it. It didn't sound like she was lying. It sounded like she was simply stating the truth.

Regardless, it was clear that Alus had an abnormal number of achievements. And Frose couldn't even imagine how difficult that would be.

"I don't know much about AWRs, but Alice, I'm sure somebody will approach you about putting that spell you used into the encyclopedia. That will of course include revealing the magic formula. While keeping an ace up your sleeve is important for any Magicmaster, I don't recommend rejecting them. The revelation of new spells will lead to strengthening Magicmasters overall, which will add to the power needed to protect humanity," Frose said. But her tone wasn't overbearing. It was more like a gentle warning.

Alice understood that she was being considerate as well, and her expression seemed to say not to worry. She took Frose's advice to heart, and nodded.

She finally realized the kind of creativity, skill, and knowledge that it took to create a brand-new kind of AWR, as well as a new spell. The knowledge required for them probably far surpassed what Alice could imagine. And the more she thought about that, the more she realized how blessed she was.

The three of them had spent quite a long time talking, but it felt like it took place in an instant. There was now a new crowd of people hoping to speak with Tesfia and Alice.

The stars of this party were the students. Not wanting to monopolize the two girls, Frose made a last request. "By the way, I'd also like to speak with your friend, Ms. Loki. Could you perhaps introduce me?" she asked, with a perfect mannered smile.

Loki was the only one at the Institute who Frose hadn't gotten in touch with. She'd actually been thinking about investigating her too, but now she just wanted to greet her as Alus' partner.

Meanwhile, Tesfia and Alice didn't pick up anything strange in the flow of discussion and simply nodded their heads. Nor did they think of the risk that things might get complicated once Frose and Loki met.

By the time they realized—it was too late. Tesfia recalled the talk they'd had back at home, and got a bad feeling about it. She looked away awkwardly, but of all places, her eyes fell on Loki.

If possible, Tesfia and Alice wanted Frose to hold off until later. After all, Loki was a bit restless and unstable now that Alus was absent.

Not showing any concern for their circumstances, Frose followed Tesfia's stare and spotted Loki.

Sitting in the corner of the ballroom was a silver-haired girl. This was without a doubt the girl she'd seen in the semi-finals.

Nobles were watching her from afar. Anyone who'd seen that match would be able to tell just how strong she was. From what Frose knew, there had been very few matches at that high of a level in this student-focused tournament. It might even compare to the epic match between the now-Singles Jean Rumbulls and Lettie Kultunca.

Frankly put, Loki had a bright future ahead of her. Moreover, though small, she had an almost fairy-tale-like beauty.

Questions of her bloodline and family were secondary. The nobles gathered here were all hoping to take her as a wife for their sons. Even lower-standing nobles would likely be willing to pay a very generous bride price several times the usual one to compete with their rivals, and it would still be worth it.

However, Frose had a different view from them. She already knew that Loki had a partner, and that it was Alus. Which meant that her existence could become an obstacle for Frose's ideal future for the Fable family.

She wanted nothing more than for her daughter to pull in the big fish of unknown potential that was Alus for herself.

Tesfia was incredibly beautiful, after all. Especially tonight as she wore a gorgeous dress, making her look like she'd stepped right out of a picture book.

In her younger days, Frose had experienced being flocked by men as well. She was cool-headed but had alluring good looks, earning her the envy of the other girls.

Tesfia hadn't inherited her mother's alluring kind of beauty, but at times Frose felt like she was watching her young self, and it was something Selva would bring up from time to time as well. Her daughter was still an extraordinary beauty by the world's standards, and that silver-haired girl was a wall that she would need to overcome.

Frose didn't know how Tesfia felt, but when she was in her teens, it wouldn't have been strange for her to be hostile, let alone jealous, if she'd had a classmate like Loki.

In short, Frose acknowledged Loki as a worthy rival for her daughter. That's why seeing Loki get roped into a foreign family or even a noble family from Alpha would be boring—especially since she was her daughter's friend, and Frose hadn't even gotten the chance to introduce herself.

Her instinctive desire to monopolize talented individuals was also coming into play, even after stepping down from her position as a capable commander.

*That said, I suppose there's no need to rush yet.* In case she couldn't get a hold on Alus, Tesfia would have to marry a promising man as planned, though her performance in the tournament had been more than enough to give her high expectations for her Magicmaster future. So Frose was willing to overlook her age when she married to some degree.

As her mother, Frose wanted to fulfill her daughter's wishes as much as she could. And if she were to achieve great accomplishments as a Magicmaster, she would have more options to choose from.

Magicmasters took risks when standing on the frontlines, but at the same time that was the duty of the nobility. Overcoming those risks and displaying a degree of prowess could do wonders when entering the world of politics.

At any rate, Frose had already made up her mind. She would wait until Tesfia's graduation as she'd said.

As these thoughts ran through her head, Frose gazed at Loki again. The nobles after her talents were hoping to arrange a marriage, or at least a marriage interview, with her. They were, in a word, unscrupulous.

One after another they shamelessly approached her. Frose wasn't really one to talk, but it was like the ugly side of noble society was manifesting before her eyes.

Loki's opponent in the tournament, Fillic, was more than strong enough to become Tesfia's fiancé, and he had a promising future ahead of him as well. He wore a friendly smile even now, behaving like a proper noble, and was handling people with ease. Perhaps Jean Rumbulls had a hand in that too.

But from Frose's point of view he didn't leave a favorable impression. He might know how to slip around the other party's intentions, but he gave off a shady feel.

She could find his rank acceptable, but she sensed he was too used to the ways of the world, and she didn't think too highly of him.

If anything, she found a decisive, unapologetic and insolent attitude like Alus' more preferable. Though that was probably only a thought she'd had after setting her eyes on Alus. If it wasn't for him, Frose would no doubt have walked over to Fillic.

To an outsider, the world of nobility was surely a mystery.

However, the nobility greatly aided humanity in their ability to survive. That was why nobles had protected their names for generations.

Not only did they enjoy the benefits of the upper class, but they also had the right to reside near the Tower of Babel—the farthest spot from the wall separating humanity from Fiends—as well as the ability to use their wealth to hire Magicmasters as guards. Depending on their resourcefulness and capital strength, they could even be permitted to hold land.

And most of all, they were promoted quickly in the military, and it wasn't unusual for those from the older families to have a private army from their ancestors' generations.

Their positions were protected by the rulers and by national policy, and their bloodlines produced talented Magicmasters who contributed to society. However, they also had a tendency to degenerate into a privileged class that indulged in their luxurious lifestyles.

Throughout history, the nobility took pride in fighting Fiends for humanity's sake. Thinking of what the nobility was like now, Frose could feel something akin to embarrassment rise inside her.

In recent years, the Magicmaster profession had opened up to the general public more and more. That trend had only been further spurred on by the introduction of assigning ranks by merit and achievements.

In other words, the powerful grasp on the world of Magicmasters that the nobility once had was turning into a thing of the past.

That said... few could shed the sense of privilege that came with noble birth. And Frose thought it was inevitable that they would desperately search for the best value on the market. But even then...

Some bitter looks were being directed at Frose. Because of her presence, the nobility were unable to speak with Tesfia and Alice. *I'm not sure I'd call it greedy or what...* Sensing the uncomfortable atmosphere, Frose simply shrugged it off. Of course she understood that they were that way for their children's sake, and in a sense, she was like them.

And because of that, she decided to part from the two girls. "Now that I've spotted Ms. Loki, I will go and greet her. So why don't the two of you stay here and speak with everyone? This party would never end if I kept you to myself."

"But Mother..." Tesfia was somewhat flustered. But she must have understood her position.

"Fia, take a look around you. It'll be a good opportunity for you to study up on noble society. You as well, Alice."

"M-Me too?!" Alice was surprised as the discussion suddenly turned to her. Her friend with full noble blood was one thing, but as a simple commoner, and one without parents, she'd just assumed she'd be left out. In reality, she was as popular as Tesfia, but the fact that she hadn't realized it was just like her.

"Of course. If you're planning on becoming a Magicmaster, it's not something you can look away from. Just think of it as preparing for life in



the future and take it easy. But... if you don't like it, you'll have to say so. It's easy to get caught up in their web, so be careful."

Alice was easily pressured, so that last bit really hit home. "Y-Yes, I'll be careful."

"Don't worry Alice, I'll try to stay close to you," Tesfia said to cheer her up. But Alice's expression remained clouded.

Incidentally, Tesfia wasn't confident that she'd be able to calmly brush off all of the nobles coming to speak with her. But if she treated them badly, it would reflect poorly on her family. She didn't think that this kind of place—where marriage offers flew about wildly—was a good match for her. If anything, she was starting to get something akin to an allergic reaction to the words *engagement* and *marriage*. Despite her slight headache, Tesfia put on the mask of a noble daughter.

"If you do find a good man, make sure to establish a claim. The ideal would be a field officer or higher. If that's not possible, then make sure they're at least from a family of a Double Digit. And watch out for families that only have a long history. Well, I will be off to greet Ms. Loki now. I'll be back when things have settled down."

After glancing over at Selva to ensure he was watching over the two girls about to descend onto a battlefield, Frose stepped out of the crowd and headed for Loki with two glasses in her hands.

Seeing her graceful gestures and alluring eyes, the nobles and their followers stepped out of her way. Around ten years had passed since she'd left the military, but Frose's fame was fresh in their memories even now, and her beauty showed no sign of fading either. The more lustful male nobles wanted to get a chance to know her better after a single glance.

But Frose simply wore a gentle smile as she elegantly walked through the packed venue.

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"Why am I even in a place like this...?" The muttered words left her lips and disappeared without reaching anyone's ears. The conversations around her were turning into annoying noises, as if they were stabbing into her eardrums.

Loki had been alone since the second party... no, since the first one. After she had sent recruiters away, nobody approached her, and she simply waited for time to pass. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she was like a lost child who had wandered into an unknown world, and wasn't sure what to do.

But most of all, she was lonely because the person who was supposed to be here wasn't. She was alone in a place without Alus.

She felt like she'd been cut off from the rest of the world. Loki only knew about life in the military and the Outer World, so being in such a showy place in a gorgeous dress was like being in a different world. Just what was she supposed to do? She'd never had any interest in this party to begin with. Nor did she feel any urge to amuse herself with friendly chatter.

Every time this kind of event took place, Loki was made to realize that this ordinary life was only possible with Alus by her side. And when she was alone like this, it all fell apart... she couldn't even bring herself to smile.

It was because Alus was by her side that she could enjoy an ordinary life. Once he was gone, Loki's heart was like the surface of a frozen lake in winter, with not even a ripple of emotion showing.

She was relieved to have accomplished the goal of winning that Alus had left up to her, but the problems began there. It started with the vulgar recruiters, and even after firmly rejecting them, a couple of nobles who wore their ulterior motives on their sleeves approached her during the second party too. The words they spoke were all politely dressed up, but full of filth that put Loki in a bad mood.

On the surface it all appeared very nice, but Loki interpreted it in another way. She was already showing a displeased look to keep people from coming over, but it didn't help to fully clear her surroundings.

If Alus were here, she wouldn't have to bother looking at this kind of riff-raff, and she'd be able to enjoy herself even if their surroundings got a little noisy. Alus would surely overlook her grumbling. And while he'd show a wry smile as if to chide Loki for her biting words, he'd probably add in a few frank, but to Loki, pleasant, words of his own.

When she thought about that, she really started to miss their usual back and forth. In the opening made when she thought this, a lady took a step towards her, and Loki directed a sharp stare her way. She wore heavy makeup and awfully strong perfume, and plenty of rings adorned with non-magic gems.

Loki would struggle to smile with even one of those aspects being present. Her glance had a clear sense of hostility to it, as if to say not to get any closer. She especially couldn't stand that smell.

Yet a couple of people approached her despite her warning. They must have been reckless, not know their place, or possibly even be strong and confident in their strength... at the very least, if they were fledgling Magicmasters, they should get the point.

But looking at their manner of walking from the corner of her eye, Loki determined that they were simply idiots. They were far from being masters of mana control, as they were full of openings. As a result, Loki was the most displeased she'd been so far this evening.

As she wearily sat down in a nearby chair, someone stepped into her personal space with great enthusiasm.

It was a well-dressed man wearing a comfortable-looking tailcoat adorned with luxurious accessories here and there. It was hard to believe he was a Magicmaster or had ever set foot in the Outer World. Of course, a Magicmaster's ability wasn't all that determined someone's position in the military or in noble circles.

The man was in his late forties, and was accompanied by another man who was in the prime of his life, either a butler or bodyguard. From Loki's assessment, he would at least be a little more useful in a fight.

"You are Loki Leevahl, are you not? My name is Buhon, the head of the noble Moretruo family. I have come all the way from Halcapdia to bring you an offer I'm sure you will find favorable."

He chose to stand at the end of the table, forcing the small Loki to have to look up at him from her seat, but he wasn't all that tall himself. So the hand he held out to Loki didn't reach higher than her chest.

The sound of metal rubbing against metal rang out from his hand. Looking down at it, she saw a gaudy display of rings on each of his fat fingers.

Loki expressionlessly gazed up at the man. As she did, his rude glance fell on her face and went down to her neck, then her chest, and finally down to her legs. She found it hard to endure his vulgar stare and unconsciously clutched the pendant hanging from her neck. It was fitted with a dark gem, and it had been given to her by Alus in the past.

Without a shred of care for her feelings, the man crudely spoke her name again. As his mouth twisted into an ugly smile, it was enough to tell what he was thinking. Eventually he interpreted Loki's lack of reaction as her not wanting to shake his hand. He composedly shrugged his shoulders, and looked back to the butler behind him.

Loki felt like everything the man did was exaggerated, and with him having approached her, her surroundings sounded like they'd gotten even noisier. He'd called himself Buhon, but it wasn't a name she could remember. That said, she only knew a handful of noble names. It didn't really matter, as to her they were all the same.

In fact, Alus being worked so hard was largely because of them. A young Magicmaster of unknown origin achieving one thing after another was bound to attract some attention, and also some harassment. And with him being something of a right-hand man to the Governor-General, who rarely appeared in public, Alus was bound to attract even more people who didn't think well of him. Especially with people who'd climbed to the top for reasons outside of their ability, such as using their privilege as nobility.

While the Governor-General had the final say in military matters, he wasn't able to ignore all selfish demands made by nobles. If the military tore itself apart because of that, they wouldn't be able to focus on fighting Fiends. Not to mention there was a degree of reason behind their demands. Letting a powerful Magicmaster play around as he pleased would not be in the national interest, whereas putting that power to work to reclaim as much territory as possible would be.

Moreover, even if he wanted more allies aside from the Governor-General, very few people knew Alus. That was partly because of the need to keep his powers confidential, and partly because he himself wanted it that way. At any rate, with that as her reasoning, Loki wasn't fond of nobility.

She felt like that ‘favorable offer’ of Buhon’s wasn’t even worth listening to, but he seemed to take her silence as confirmation that she wanted to hear it.

“I’ve taken the liberty of looking into you. You are still young, yet with so much power, so I feel you have enough qualities to marry into my family. My son is twenty-three, but the age difference is nothing to be concerned about. We would take you in as his first wife. If you give birth to an heir within a few years, our future will be secure. I have connections within the military as well, so if you want rapid promotions, that can be arranged. It’s a good deal for you, don’t you think?”

His vulgar mouth hung open as he looked her up and down, his eyes finally landing on her face. “And I’m sure my son will take a liking to your beauty...”

It was almost as if he was saying he’d take her as a wife himself if he were ten years younger. He gazed at her like she was a doll for sale in a store, running his lecherous stare down from her face to her collarbone to her breasts, and stopping on her thighs.

Loki let out a heavy sigh, wishing that the man before her was a Fiend instead. At the same time, she figured someone like this would be useful in shaking off the eyes of the curious onlookers once and for all. “I have no interest in you, but do you not know that I have a partner?”

“Hmph! It doesn’t matter whose partner you are. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to release you from that foolish restraint immediately. It would be a trifling matter for the Moretruo family.”

Loki’s expression changed at those words. Her face, which had been expressionless, now twisted into a look of indignation and disdain. He didn’t know anything about how long she’d worked to fulfill her dream. And he’d even dismissed it as a ‘foolish restraint.’ Even going so far as saying he’d release her from him!

“—Ahh!!” Taking Loki’s killing intent head on, Buhon flinched. The butler behind him gazed in wonderment, not moving an inch. However, almost nobody aside from Buhon and his butler noticed the change in Loki. And who could blame them? It was hard to imagine that kind of intent coming from the small girl.

Buhon was in a cold sweat, and his lips trembled. Loki stared at him and quietly said, “That’s not something you could do. And if you insist—are you prepared to stake your life on it? You want me to marry a pig that can only indulge itself? You have to be joking... I’m sure there’s cattle somewhere suitable for marrying the son of a pig.”

“Y-Y-You little—!! Don’t you run your mouth off to me, you little brat! You won’t get off easy hurling such insults at me!!”

“It seems you understand human language, so let me ask you again... Are you prepared to stake your life?” Loki was only stating the truth. To her, canceling her partnership with Alus would be the same as losing her life.

"Ridiculous! A mere novice Magicmaster's life would never be as valuable as mine. Who the hell do you think you are? Here I was generously offering to take you in... but my mind's changed now. It seems I'll have to show you who the real cattle is."

*She might be acting mature, but in the end she's just an ignorant kid,* Buhon thought, as he signaled the butler from behind his back. Understanding his intentions, the butler stepped closer.

"You can do whatever you want... just capture that girl. You know the rest. I've already investigated you," Buhon continued, turning to Loki. "You are all alone, and there's nobody to save you... and even if there was..."

"Understood. I will make preparations right away." The butler bowed to his master, and just as he straightened up—

"My, that's an awfully violent-sounding discussion."

"...!!"

"If I were to borrow your own words, you are being very childish towards a mere student, Lord Moretruo. This party is to celebrate the victors of the tournament. And just what exactly were you planning to do in a place like this? It seems you're planning to be quite outrageous in this party hosted by the rulers. You've fallen from Alpha to Halcapdia, and now it seems you have your back to the wall." The smiling woman—Frose—showed no signs of flinching at Loki's still-present killing intent, as she came forward.

When he saw her, Buhon clicked his tongue with a bitter expression. "... The Fable vixen."

Loki was convinced once she heard the name. No wonder she looked familiar. This was the mother of the redhead under Alus' care. At the same time, she felt she looked a little too young to be her mother.

"Oh my, so you still remember me. But if you're here, that means you haven't completely fallen to ruin yet."

"How impudent!"

"But you have become decrepit... and you're putting your incompetence on full display."

It appeared to be a potentially explosive situation, but both parties knew they were just talking. They weren't foolish enough to actually duke it out here, and their exchange of sharp words was more like engaging in a card game.

The Moretruo family only had a pedigree going for it, as its history ran comparably deep for nobility. Because of that, they had a strong fixation on lineage that was typical for traditional noble families.

They were behind the times, but there was a reason for it. The family originated in Alpha, and had been quite influential in the past, but their power had waned after decades of not producing any excellent Magicmasters. Without being able to keep up appearances as nobles, they'd had a fire lit under them. Moreover, Buhon's rank as a Magicmaster had

fallen from those days, but back then he had led a couple of squads, and eventually a company.

At that time he was competing with Frose for the position of commander. Eventually, though, Buhon stopped being entrusted with important positions after failing to produce the kinds of results Frose did.

That was a couple of decades ago... meaning it was none other than Frose who had accelerated the Moretruo family's fall.

In the end, the family's minor accomplishments attracted the attention of Halcapdia, and they had moved there, as if running away. That was why they obsessed over bringing strong Magicmaster blood into their lineage.

"Tsk... I don't have the time to deal with you. Anyway, take care of that girl..."

"Oh? But I can't let that slide, you see. Ms. Loki is my daughter's friend... not to mention she will be important for Alpha's future."

"What are you getting at?"

Frose casually brushed off Moretruo's stare. "Oh, dear. Did you grow senile over the years? Do you not understand that the Moretruo family's authority is a thing of the past... in other words, I can crush you under my thumb."

"... Urk!" Buhon cast his eyes downward, clenching his fist as his body trembled, holding back his anger. But that did nothing to change reality. The Fable family was one of the three most influential families in Alpha, and it wouldn't be impossible for them to crush his family.

However—"B-But she is just a mere girl, why would the Fable family go so far to back her up? What's in it for you? If you hand her over, I'd..."

"Why don't you try it?"

"Excuse me?"

"I said—just try it. Though you'll have to be prepared for your family to never rise again, including your son or his descendants."

"..." Buhon gritted his teeth over the repeated humiliations. But it was only for a few seconds. "We're leaving!!" As he stormed off with a snort, the butler hurriedly followed after him.

The nobles who had been looking on were still staring at Frose. Her clear voice rang out in the ballroom. "Sorry for the fuss, everybody," she said with an apologetic smile. "I'm sure you would all like to pass on your congratulations to Ms. Loki, but she still hasn't fully recovered from her match, so I believe it would be best to restrain yourselves," she added, making sure that everyone would have no choice but to accept it.

There were some who suspected that Frose might be pushing ahead of the other families to take Loki for herself, but everyone knew she didn't have a son. So even if they couldn't accept it, there was nobody who directly complained... of course that was also in part because they realized how reckless an act that would be.



Loki still had an angry expression, making it clear that she wasn't going to go along with that kind of topic in the slightest. So before long, the nobles around Loki disappeared, making their way elsewhere.

After confirming they were alone, Frose turned back to Loki. "Once again, it's a pleasure to meet you... Ms. Loki."

"No, the pleasure's all mine. Thank you for your help, Your Excellency." Recalling the position Frose had held in the past, Loki made sure to address her with respect.

However, Frose was a little taken aback by her manner. She'd been called that by her students when she was an instructor, but she'd returned her title when she'd left the military. Now she was only the head of the Fable family. "That's how I was addressed in the past. You can feel free to address me however you like."

"I understand, Ms. Frose."

Frose had a different opinion of this silver-haired girl than she had of Alus. She had a civil attitude, which was more a result of her keeping a high guard around herself. The thick wall she put up kept anyone who wanted to get close to her out. "Still, you should hold back a little more. There are many nobles that are cunning and ill-natured... besides, depending on the circumstances, it might even cause trouble for Mr. Alus."

"...!! I was careless. It seems I didn't handle things calmly. Thank you for the advice." Loki hesitated upon realizing that Frose knew of her relationship with Alus, but then she was former military, so it wouldn't be strange for her to have learned that bit of information.

She thanked Frose once more with a bow, carefully observing her as she returned the bow. But she couldn't sense any plotting or scheming. She'd been on guard at first since it was Tesfia's mother, but it appeared Frose was a trustworthy individual.

"There's no need for thanks," Frose told her, handing a glass to Loki. Inside was what looked like carbonated water blended with fruit juice. It was chilled as well.

Loki went on to drink it all at once, as if regretting foolishly letting her emotions get the better of her before. It was the perfect thing to cool her hot head. If it wasn't for Frose, she would have rampaged and caused trouble for Alus.

She clearly understood the underlying causes of her blunder. It wasn't rage, but there was an uncontrollable frustration at its root. Even now, the man she wanted to serve was far away on a mission in the Outer World. That mission was likely much more difficult than usual. And yet, she was in a place like this.

An unbearable feeling welled up in her chest. She gulped down the contents of the glass as if to push it back down. When she heaved a sigh, she hurriedly snapped out of it and covered her mouth. She saw that Frose looked like she might break into a smile at any moment, so she quickly corrected her posture.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Loki Leevahl," Loki said, introducing herself, and they shook hands. Holding Frose's hand, Loki realized it wasn't as graceful and dainty as she'd expected. Instead, she felt clear traces of her rigid training, recognizing that Frose was someone who knew what true battle was like.

Ironically enough, that sensation made Loki bring her lowered guard back up. Even though Frose didn't give off a bad impression, she was still an influential noble, which was why Loki reconsidered so easily trusting her. Not to mention this was only their first meeting. It was too early to judge her character from just the one incident so far.

She'd heard the details of Tesfia's circumstances from Alus, but in the past few months, Loki felt like he was being a little too soft on others. He was coming up with reasons to look after Tesfia and Alice, but she found it lamentable. So, if Tesfia's mother was going to try to bring him into their circumstances even more, it would be Loki's job to shake her off. From here on, she needed to handle Frose calmly, see through her true intentions, and carefully choose her words.

But it seemed Frose picked up on Loki's caution, as she shrugged her shoulders and opened her mouth to speak. "You don't have to be so vigilant. I only came here to watch the matches and give praise to my daughter's friend who worked so hard."

"... I'm just Al's replacement," Loki said carefully.

"... So you were. But your match was really worthy of praise. You put on quite the show, and if you hadn't been hurt I'm sure you would have taken the victory."

"That was the result of my own inexperience."

"I see that you're modest. At any rate, if it wasn't for that win, the Second Magical Institute's victory would have been in question. It was truly a wonderful match."

"Thank you very much." Though suspicious of Frose's praise, Loki honestly accepted it.

"Not to mention... you're always taking care of my daughter."

"Not at all. It's something Si... Al decided."

Frose watched Loki correct herself with a warm smile. "It seems she's getting a lot of help from Mr. Alus, and from you. That girl was blessed with talent, but that's not enough by itself. Fia's gotten so much stronger in just a few months since enrolling there. She's worked hard, but it's also thanks to Alice, as well as to you and Mr. Alus, so thank you."

"Talent, is it...?" Loki repeated.

"Yes, that's right. There's a lot of hard work involved, but talent is important. And it's because you have it that you have the ranks that you do, no?"

"I don't think that's accurate. Ranking is only one facet of it. It won't do you any good in the Outer World. Neither Al nor I really put that much focus on our ranks. You need to rely on your experience to survive. Just because

you have talent, there's no guarantee that you'll survive for long. That's why what Al teaches them isn't the trick to raising their ranks, but how to defeat Fiends."

Her answer was an eloquent testament to her past. They were powerful words that were spoken—not by a mere student or novice—but from the personal experience of someone who'd lived through many battles.

Frose urged her on, as if testing her. "Isn't that just the same as being strong?"

"It isn't. Being strong will certainly help keep you alive. But it won't work forever... I'm sure you might be aware of this, but..." Observing Frose's expression as she answered, Loki realized that Frose was questioning her despite probably already knowing Loki's past, and maybe even Alus' past. If that was the case, there wasn't much point in keeping up the façade about her and Alus' relationship.

Furthermore, it was clear from Frose's expression that she was already well aware of what Loki was about to say. Anyone in the military would have said as much themselves. But even so, she must have wanted to hear Loki say it anyway.

So Loki continued to speak. "It's more important to understand Fiends so you can more efficiently and rationally eliminate them. Reaching that level means being able to handle yourself in any situation. Knowing and correctly assessing your limits also helps you to not get overconfident."

Loki recalled Alus' words, and carefully spoke as if pondering them anew. "After all, only those who can survive can reach the top of all Magicmasters."

Frose's eyes opened in surprise for a moment, before narrowing, and she smiled as if impressed. Frankly, she was startled to see someone so young having come this far. It was true that the more skilled the Magicmaster, the less fixated they were on rank. That was because they understood the true strength that Loki spoke of.

The conclusion she'd reached was probably true in a pragmatic sense. But the state of the world that pointed to was lopsided. The truth alone wasn't enough to survive on. You wouldn't be able to balance life in the Inner and Outer Worlds like that. Loki's claim was sharp and powerful, but at the same time, it wasn't the whole truth.

"... That's true." Though Loki was young and immature, her words rippled through Frose. Her slight hesitation was due to that. At the same time, Frose had the sense that she was getting old.

Meanwhile, Loki felt something unexpected as she gazed at Frose. Despite what she'd said, she also understood the current hierarchical system and ranking of Magicmasters, and couldn't deny that the standard evaluation was a fundamental part of that world. While she and Alus didn't adhere to it, there were those who did. That stance of hers was of course influenced by Alus, but by now she'd accepted it for herself, and considered it correct.

Yet for some reason, Frose had an expression of clarity—as if she'd just realized something.

Silence filled the space between them for a few moments, until Frose started the conversation again, but in a completely different direction. "So, do you happen to know anything about Mr. Alus' disappearance in the middle of the tournament? I heard he had some business to attend to."

Loki was taken aback by the sudden change, but figured Frose had decided their previous topic of discussion was finished. But here was the question she'd been expecting.

Thinking of how to answer, Loki came up with several different possibilities in her head. It was likely that the information had been leaked by Tesfia or Alice. However, she'd only told them that it was a mission. So saying it was a leak might be a bit of an exaggeration. But considering the circumstances, maybe it would have been better to keep everything secret from those two.

*I'll need to reconsider how much I tell Ms. Tesfia and Ms. Alice about important matters... Or maybe she'd need to teach them what the word 'confidential' really meant. I guess it was my fault for being careless.*

At any rate, it was safe to assume that Frose already had some information, though whether she knew that Lettie was taking part in it too was unclear. "Yes, he got an urgent mission and had to leave..." Ultimately, Loki decided to affirm what Frose already knew. If she were to say that she didn't have a clue it would sound unnatural, seeing as how she was his partner. And considering their interactions so far, she didn't think Frose would back down from an off-the-cuff response.

"My, that's a shame. I would have loved to speak with him again."

"I am sorry."

"It's fine. It's something that happens. In the military you practically don't have any private time, after all. But if it's a mission, why wouldn't his partner go with him? That is the point of a partner, isn't it?"

Frose said this in a nonchalant tone, but the words pierced Loki's heart. She'd stayed behind on his orders, but it did go against the point of a partner. Which was why she also felt lonely.

Loki's discomfort aside, Frose's behavior was casual, as if simply asking the question that came to mind.

"Having two participants leave the tournament would have really hurt the Second Magical Institute. And I stayed behind at Al's own instructions."

"... That's just wrong."

"... What is?" Frose's sudden words made Loki stare at the smiling woman.

"If you're fine with that, then that's that. But a partner's more than a simple pawn. And you're not just a doll that obeys orders, are you?"

"I would be fine with that! Not to mention I'm a student too."

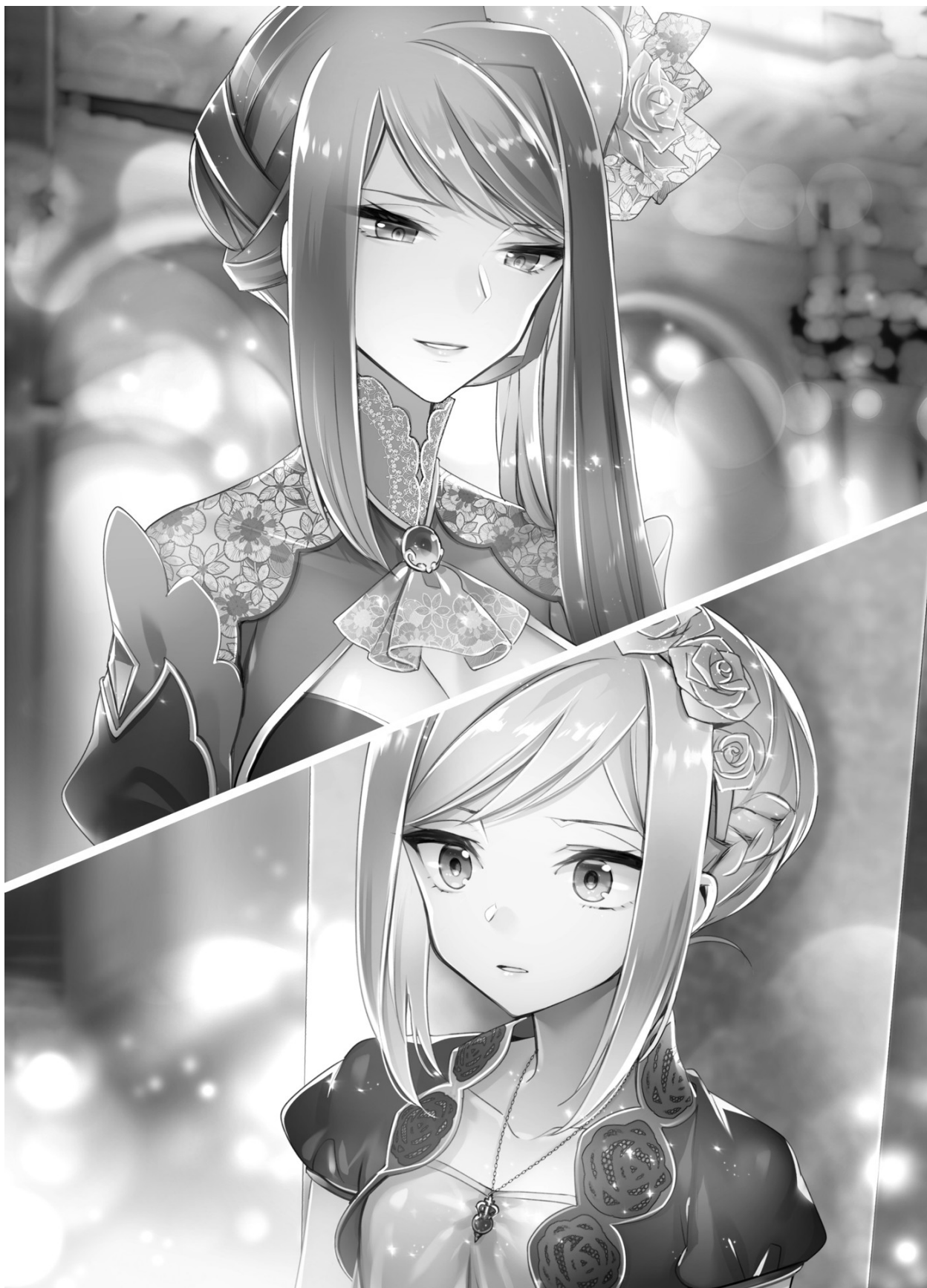
"I see... but you're still a human, so you won't be able to fully become a doll." Frose's gaze seemed to see through everything, and her words threw Loki's mental restraint for a loop.

"... Ms. Frose, you can only say that because you don't know anything!" Frose didn't know anything about why Loki decided to become Alus' partner, or her path to get there. That alone meant the world to Loki... so someone who knew nothing had no right to say anything! Even though she knew it was foolish, she found herself getting worked up.

And she knew the reason why. Even if Frose didn't know the whole story, she had mercilessly pointed out the essence of Loki's discontent. Which was why she found herself lashing back, instinctively shouting out words of anger.

But Frose's expression remained unchanged. She simply shrugged and sighed, as if to say that Loki was a handful. "That's true, it might not be any of my business. But I can see the disconnect because of that. If you're satisfied, then it's fine. A partnership is just one type of role division. Obeying the orders of the other is correct in a sense. But you're dissatisfied with that, aren't you?"





“...!!”

“It’s all over your face.” Before Loki could ask how she knew, Frose had answered her.

It really was like she could see right through her. Loki had her hands full just objecting. And each and every one of Frose’s words was a powerful thrust that struck her heart. As a result, the guard she kept up to shield her true intentions was stripped away, leaving her defenseless before Frose.

“I might have retired, but I was in the military for a long time. So here’s some advice. Magicmasters are only human. They have feelings that they can’t hold back either. And in the end, it’s up to you if you want to keep killing your emotions or try to satisfy them. But let me just say this. Endurance is necessary at times, but haven’t you been enduring all this time?”

“T-That’s... But...”

“Don’t you think it would be good to not give up on some things? In your own way... that you yourself can accept. That would make you more attractive as a woman.”

Her gentle smile and on-target words made Loki’s heart skip a beat. At the same time, the feelings she’d sealed down at the bottom of her heart began to stir.

“But I... B-Besides, he promised that next time...” Loki muttered fragmented, broken pieces of a sentence. Her eyes darted around as she searched for excuses.

She could strongly feel the hesitation inside of her. It was like her heart rejected what her head already knew. It was like two people were clashing inside of her.

Frose could easily guess the emotion the small girl in front of her was holding down. Calling out to a passing waiter, she put her empty glass on the silver tray. “You’re his what? And what is this ‘next time?’”

*“...!!” Loki had a shocked expression. She felt something bursting in her chest. I’m his what? I’m just his partner... no, that’s not right. That’s just an excuse. It’s a convenient role, like in a drama. When is the next time? What will the next time even be... but can I really ask for more?*

Shaking her head at her thoughts, Loki murmured softly as if tracing a difficult problem that had no solution, “Next time...”

It was something she already knew. Something she’d realized long ago. But putting it into words felt strangely off. It was like two spinning gears that instead of meshing with each other, spun separately and apart from one another. Like her words were nothing but fruitless logic... like her feelings were running in circles.

*The next time will...!! But...* Even then, there was hesitation in Loki’s eyes. Her instincts were telling her to be honest with her desires, while her reasoning side told her that it was selfishness. The two sides of her were competing to gain the upper hand. As a result, she was frozen in place.



Frose couldn't bear to watch, and, sighing, decided not to mince words. "You really are a handful. You're still young, so move first and think later!" At the same time, Frose's white hand swiftly moved to Loki's chest, her slender fingers nearly touching the pendant with black light that she'd received from Alus.

In the next moment, Frose's hand moved to Loki's shoulder, spinning her small body around, and giving her a gentle shove on the back.

Taking a few steps forward, Loki looked back in surprise. Her faltering showed her indecision, as if asking if it was okay to do what she wanted. If she was being honest, Loki never wanted to leave Alus' side for even a second. But having been in the Outer World, she already knew. Those who were indecisive were only a hindrance on the battlefield. It was clear what kind of result would happen if you took someone like that to the Outer World.

"... Thank you very much. I'll think about it on my own."

"Think, is it? I just hope you realize it. But still, the title of Magicmaster can sure get in the way at times like these."

Loki deeply bowed to Frose and turned to leave the ballroom.

That's when Frose called out to her back, "Don't worry about the party, I'll smooth things out here. But..." She saw Loki was only staring at the exit. "You're forgetting about your injuries..." Frose continued, but her words never reached Loki, who had rushed towards the door with a troubled look on her face.

Frose had planned to push the nobles away using Loki's injuries as an excuse, so at least she wanted to help her save face. As these thoughts ran through her mind, the small back had already disappeared from the ballroom.

Loki had seen too much of the Outer World to be able to live in a glamorous, gentle world more appropriate for a girl her age. Indeed, far too much. She'd mixed in with adults since her youth, spending each day fighting as a Magicmaster and building up achievements. And even now she might not be able to fully become a child again.

As Loki exited the venue, she left behind nobles staring after her, looking stunned. It was an awkward moment, and Frose put her hand over her mouth and let out a forced laugh to smooth it over. For now, she would tell them that Loki still wasn't feeling well from her match, and was returning to her room.

Shortly thereafter, the slightly hoarse voice of a man called out to Frose from behind her. "Master Frose, why would you help the enemy... you know that she's..."

"That's true. I was just going to greet her... Maybe I'm getting old, Selva."

"No, perhaps you've returned to your youth. Back when you were at a more troublesome age... returning to a childlike innocence."

Frose glanced at the elderly butler with a twitching cheek, before sighing as if giving up on something. Having Loki tell her that rank was worthless made her recall that she had more or less understood the same thing when she stood on the battlefield.

But after leaving the military and the fighting behind, she found herself being poisoned by the prevailing focus on ranking so common among the nobility. It was pathetic.

It was true that ranking was one established indicator of a Magicmaster's standing. It was an unavoidable truth. Only those who proved their strength and reached a certain level had it. Only those with the rank to back them up were convincing.

However, a rank could never become a person's *raison d'être*. And it was a young girl who'd reminded Frose of this. That was why she'd given her daughter's rival in love advice that she didn't have to.

At least, that's what Frose thought, but Selva's comment about childlike innocence made her realize another motive within her.

She thought of her past as she said, "Well, I couldn't help myself after seeing someone with such earnest feelings. Someone so used to the world who's still able to hold such passionate feelings. It's a wonderful thing."

"So it is."

Seeing Selva's meaningful smile, Frose suddenly fell silent. She had understood something. The words she'd said to Loki weren't meant just for her. In fact, she was the one who had regretted enduring for too long, because in the end she'd lost her husband. That weighed heavily on her even now.

Keeping personal feelings out of missions was common sense in the military. But back then... nobody knew what would happen, so she should have moved even if it was only based on her emotions.

As if to shake off the sentimentality of those long-ago events, Frose put on a small smile and muttered, "Still... even for someone who grew up in the military, that girl is too awkward." The same could be said for Alus, but she'd more or less understood that the circumstances were different for him. "I just hope Fia's fighting spirit is as strong."

"Sometimes one needs to be patient. I'm sure the young miss will do it."

Glancing at Selva, Frose chose to drop an explosive statement. "Selva, if the Fable family ever stops being part of the nobility..."

"I would serve you until I could no longer move. The young miss is like my own granddaughter, I would never give up this job," Selva said, laughing, his beard shaking.

Seeing his expression, it seemed Frose's bomb had been a dud. She silently thanked him.

As she began walking, she saw her daughter in the distance. "In the end, it would be a mistake for anyone aside from the person it concerns to decide their future. It might only end up planting seeds of regret. And if I did that—Fia really would resent me."

Frose could be calculating, but she thought again about the matter of her daughter's future and fiancé. Would Tesfia see success as a Magicmaster, or uphold her appearance as a noble...? Maybe she could do both.

Perhaps the decision should be left up to the daughter instead of the mother. But if she were allowed, she'd at least like to lend a helping hand. She wouldn't give up her role as a mother until Tesfia took over as the family head. Until her still-growing daughter could take over everything, Frose would protect the family. Though it seemed she still had a long time to go.

Her time as the head of the family had been almost as dizzyingly busy as her time in the military. But right now, Frose's steps were light, as if she were a child innocently running around in a meadow.

"Selva... I'm glad we came."

"Yes."

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Leaving the ballroom behind, Loki made her way straight to her hotel room as if driven by something.

She worried for a moment if she really should've left like that. But even if she'd stayed, she would only have been flooded by annoying people.

She had run away from a worthless world. But it was so she could dive into a more meaningful one.

Loki wasn't really interested in marriage, and never had been. More importantly...

She pushed the keycard against the reader in a hurry, pulling the door open as soon as she heard the unlocking sound and rushing inside as if chased by something. Words ran in circles inside her head, all of them Frose's words of wisdom.

Loki sat down on the bed, putting her head in her hands and staring down at her legs, deep in thought. The sensation of the mattress pushing back against her weight seemed to softly envelop her thoughts.

This was something she understood even without Frose's words. Her feelings for Alus were just one-sided gratitude. But now she'd been made to reconsider how to use her life.

What Frose said was probably correct. Loki didn't want to cause trouble for Alus while claiming it was for his sake. With her lacking strength as a Magicmaster, she'd only get in his way. Indeed, he'd clearly said as much.

The room's dim light cast a deep shadow on Loki's face. She had thought she'd be able to ease her mind if she was alone, but it only brought her deeper into her thoughts.

The question she'd unconsciously shied away from surfaced in her mind. For what purpose had she become his partner?

Loki fell onto the bed and pushed her face into the pillow. After a few seconds, she shot back up from it. "Ah, that's right. I got the wrong idea after spending time at the Institute together with Sir Alus..." she muttered

to no one in particular. "I was under the mistaken impression that this life, which is supposed to end when my role does, would still go on. This life right now is a simple time-limited thing. All of my time is meant for Sir Alus, yet..."

In her monologue she was blaming herself for her misunderstanding. She would never become a hindrance. Thinking back to Alus' atmosphere when he left, she understood that the mission he had must have been very difficult. If there was an enemy on that mission, they must be pretty formidable.

But no matter the enemy, she could surely be of use. Using her own body as a shield, she should at least be able to buy a few seconds of time. And if her trivial life could be of use to him...

Life was fleeting and fragile, easily coming to an end at a moment's notice. She'd seen it countless times. In that case, one's life should be used in the moment when it could shine the brightest.

And for Loki—that moment was for Alus' sake. It didn't really matter how it was used, be it as a shield from a Fiend's attack or as a sacrificial pawn. She simply wanted to use this life he'd saved for his sake.

She hadn't worried over it until now. "I've survived and lived so far for Sir Alus' sake." She wasn't at the Institute to live out the youth she never got to experience, nor was it to have a normal life outside of the military. Loki only had a reason to exist at Alus' side, and the only way to repay the great debt she owed was to give her own life.

*Yes, if I can be of use to him, I...* Alus would surely tell her that she'd done a good job. He would pat her head in the last moments of her life... with that kind of end, she could truly be at peace.

However... "Haha." A somewhat self-ridiculing laugh leaked out from her lips. There was no way that would happen. It was just a selfish fantasy. The Alus she'd been reunited with at the Institute was different from back then. She could easily tell. He wasn't going to praise her if she came to an end like that.

Right now, he would... "He scolded me for using a taboo... so there's no way he would praise me." Instead, he would probably get angry at her for pointlessly wasting her life.

So what was she supposed to do? Not being of any use was painful. She just wanted to be of use to him. Even if that meant throwing her life away like some piece of trash...

However...

As Loki brooded over that, her eyes rested on the table. On top of it was a rugged military bag with not a trace of cuteness to it. Its focus lay squarely in function.

Sticking out from it were the edges of some folded clothes. This was the answer to everything. She'd had no need for it in the tournament, but had brought it anyways. Inside was her familiar military uniform and plenty of AWR knives she'd brought with her all the way from Alpha.

That was what Loki understood best. She stood up, and stopped trying to hold back the feelings that overflowed from within her. She'd fulfilled her promise. Alus couldn't complain about the results.

Besides... Loki took a long, deep breath. As she did, she unconsciously reached for her chest, rubbing the surface of the pendant filled with dark mana.

After a few moments, her gloomy mood was gone without a trace. She would no longer hesitate so that she wouldn't have to lie to herself, so that she wouldn't have any regrets. What scared her the most would be losing the opportunity to use her life... to lose the person she wanted to use it for.

## Thirty-Ninth Chapter

### What Stirs in the Depths

The squad members all focused intently on that one point.

Normally, it would be something to rejoice over. But they couldn't help but feel how wrong it was for him to still be alive in the Outer World.

Hearing his name from Lettie, Alus asked, "Duncal is Balmes' Single, isn't he?"

"Yeah. I've only seen him a few times, but take a look at his chest."

At Lettie's urging, Alus strained his eyes. She was pointing at the chest of the torn dark green coat he was wearing. The coat was somewhat similar to Alpha's uniform, and on the chest were three dirtied medals.

"They don't look so good right now, but those are the medals you get in Balmes for your achievements. They're the equivalent to Alpha's Wilhelm Medal. And if he's wearing those..."

"It means he's rather accomplished."

"Yeah. And a show-off."

He must have been planning to bring medals with him to go fight Fiends, but with that cynical comeback, Alus got a glimpse of Lettie's impression of Duncal. He didn't bother to press the point further, but it was likely that this was Duncal himself. The Wilhelm Medal was Alpha's highest honor, awarded for great contributions in protecting the nation, reclaiming territory, and the like.

Of course, both Alus and Lettie had received the decoration, an honor for any Magicmaster. But when it came to Balmes, its medals didn't hold as much value as those of other nations. Balmes didn't achieve much on a national level in the battle against Fiends, and they had somewhat of an inferiority complex, wanting to be seen as equal to the other nations. As a result, because their Singles were rumored to not be up to par, Balmes tended to award them with medals for even lesser contributions.

"Then I guess we'll have to confirm it," Alus said. If it was a trap, the quickest way would be to throw in some bait and draw out their target.

The problem was who to choose. *It's not like I can use Lettie's squad members as sacrificial pawns.* Alus quickly decided that it would be easier for he himself to go.

First, he used a small magic bullet to probe for a response. With a soft sound, the small bullet flew straight into Duncal's shoulder. But as expected, there was no reaction.

Furrowing his brows, Alus looked over at Rinne as if to ask if he was really alive. She nodded back at him, her expression showing no doubt.

"Fine... Just stay on guard," he said to Lettie and Rinne, and boldly walked out of the bushes, making his way to Duncal.

The squad watched with tense expressions. A normal survivor would have reacted to getting shot in some way. And with Rinne saying he was

alive, it was very likely that this was a trap as Alus said. Some of them clenched their fists at the thought of the captain getting hurt.

With his hand on the handle of his AWR hidden under his cloak, Alus approached Duncal. "I'm a Magicmaster from Alpha. I found you in the middle of an extermination mission. You're Duncal, the commander of the first extermination force, is that correct?"

But maybe Duncal didn't hear him, as there was no reaction.

Moving even closer, to the point where he could touch him if he really reached for it, Alus could hear a strange sound.

He thought at first it was the sound of breathing. If it had been hoarse breathing, he could understand it. Duncal would be reacting to the bullet wound. But what he heard was a very deep and low sound. It was hard to imagine that coming from a weakened human.

The next moment, Alus' sharpened senses rang a warning bell. In the same moment as he drew his AWR—

Duncal's neck twisted unnaturally. His empty eyes turned to Alus.

"—! Tsk!"

His sunk-in eye sockets opened. But instead of eyeballs, there were pools of pitch-black liquid. The same liquid flowed from his mouth. The flow showed no signs of stopping, and Duncal's mouth spread out into a crescent-shaped smile.

Seeing that, Alus turned back and shouted, "I thought as much—everyone, get ready!"

At the same time, Rinne also picked up on the abnormality. At the site of the battle where the squad members watched over Alus and Duncal was a massive tree, and roughly halfway up it, some thirty meters above them, something rose from the surface of the trunk.

Having quickly started her search for the origin of that abnormality, Rinne could clearly see it with her magic eye. It was something that had appeared out of nowhere, from above them of all places. *I messed up. To think it disguised itself as a tree...*

That something—a Fiend—revealed itself at the same time Alus shouted his warning, and jumped down.

"Above us!!" Rinne shouted, and tried to nock an arrow onto her bow, but before she could, someone's arm wrapped around her abdomen.

"That'd be stupid. We're getting out of the way first." Lettie put her slender arms around Rinne and pulled her away. The other squad members also moved away from the Fiend's landing spot in an experienced manner.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alus could see a different Fiend attacking him. Whatever was disguised as Duncal's body attacked him from behind. It appeared there were two enemies, but before Rinne could warn him, Alus spun around and cut off the head of the Fiend disguised as Duncal.

Immediately after that, a strange pipe-like object rose from the ground and began to move. The end of the pipe attached itself to Duncal's arm. And

in an instant, Duncal's headless body flew up into the air as if pulled by something.

By that time, Duncal's clothes and body had turned black. Duncal's head was only part of the disguised Fiend, and losing it didn't amount to much damage. The black mass that was once Duncal flew over to the right arm of the huge shadow that had landed next to Rinne and the others, changing shape as it did, and turning into a four-fingered hand.

Rinne had mistakenly assumed there were two enemies, but the Fiend that had jumped down from above was the main body, with its right hand having been disguised as Duncal.

If it wasn't for the situation they were in, they would have stared in astonishment. Not only did it come with the ability to disguise itself, it was also intelligent enough to lay advanced traps. Hunting Fiends observed their prey—humans—made conjectures, and came up with effective ways to hunt them.

The Fiend had transformed into a large, dark monkey, and it unleashed an attack on the surprised squad. Bringing its massive arms together, it swung down at them like a sledgehammer. With a roaring sound, the heavy blow cratered the ground and created a shockwave.

Having dodged out of danger, Lettie, Rinne, and the rest of the squad recovered their postures and took a good look at the Fiend.

It had a dark, cracked outer shell, and stood some five or six meters tall. It had a thick-looking chest from either muscles or some unknown organ, and an ominous swell at its abdomen. Its back was abnormally bent over, and its long arms were extremely well-developed, with the four fingers having sharp claws.

The Fiend had the physique of an ape man. Its face was twisted, with its almond eyes wide open as if it couldn't focus on anything. Its nose was a set of two simple holes. And inside its gaping mouth were two rows packed full of blade-like teeth that were stained dark red.

Oddly enough, it was an ogre type, just like Alus and Lettie had talked about. It was a type of Fiend that was typically an A-class, known for their camaraderie and their tendency to form groups. It was also known as a Roscarg. For Magicmasters, it was a relatively familiar Fiend.

"Allie, it might be an ogre after all. Well, let's just go at it as usual! Obstruction and binding magic!!"

Reacting to Lettie's order, the squad swung into action. The ground rose up, and rock faces approached the Roscarg from all directions, obscuring it from view. It was sealed away tightly inside a giant rock box. On top of that, ten branches stretched down from trees that appeared from nowhere, and pierced the giant box.

It was like the classic magic trick with a person in a box and swords that was popular several generations ago, and in addition, a translucent barrier fixed the wooden swords and rock box in place.



"See how skilled they are?!" Lettie said to Rinne, as she released her and pointed to the rock box.

A muffled explosion rang out, and the rock box began to turn red from being heated up. The walls were soon blown away, but the translucent barrier held back the shock and the heat and the rock fragments.

This was the usual combination Lettie and her squad used to eliminate Fiends. To finish it off, Lettie cast Crimson Eyes to burn the target to nothingness. "Looks like we get a bonus this time, too," she said, prompting Rinne to glance up and spot Alus, who'd jumped high into the air.

As Alus descended, he created a massive sword of ice with his AWR in hand. Strangely enough, it was Tesfia's specialty, Icicle Sword. It was a simple spell he'd concocted after seeing Tesfia's spell construction. Though it was simple, it involved high-classed magic, making it not exactly easy to use.

However, it was suitable for this situation. The damage would be focused on a single spot, so it wouldn't harm any of the squad. But it wasn't a spell engraved on Alus' chain, so he couldn't hold back its strength, nor could he make adjustments to the sculpture. Not that he had any intention of doing so anyways, against a Fiend.

As a result, he produced a rugged sword, far from the beautiful craftsmanship that Tesfia could display, but it was more than enough for Alus, who put his focus on practicality. With its massive size, it was more than large and heavy enough to cut the Fiend in half, along with the box.

Before long, the ice sword easily pierced through the enveloping barrier, crushing the rock box.

As dirt and mana remnants were kicked up into the air, Alus used the recoil of the massive sword crashing into the ground to recover his posture and land soundlessly next to Lettie and Rinne.

"Did you notice...?"

Lettie answered Alus in the affirmative, with a bitter tone, "Of course I did. How long do you think I've been a Magicmaster? Looks like it's not just stupidly strong, but smart too. Not to mention... that disgusting mana leaking out of its body had contrary qualities. It's like some kinda patchwork."

Rinne said, "No, the word patchwork isn't enough to describe the mana I sensed. That's no normal Roscarg! It has a high intellect, can split up its body, control the individual parts, and also disguise itself. Not to mention how much mana it has. Its base form might have been an ogre, but this isn't normal, even for a Variant."

"Yeah, I can sense it too. The Devourer we're after should be a Variant... but this thing is too unnatural," Alus said.

Fiends could take on all sorts of natures depending on the mana they absorbed. As a result, Variants would sometimes be born, but if they took in too much mana or if they took in more mana information than they could

process, even their appearance would transform. It was a form of evolution that turned the body into a suitable vessel for the mana it contained.

Conversely, it meant that a Fiend couldn't avoid transforming if it took in more mana than its body could handle. Yet the Fiend before them maintained its form as a Roscarg, despite its complex and unusual mana. That gave Alus and the others a real sense of discomfort.

"—!! It's coming!" Rinne picked up on the change the quickest and warned the others. Upon a closer look, she saw a crack running along the ice sword that pierced the rock box.

"I expected as much," Alus said. "Don't let your guards down... We're treating this as an S-class!"

The ground shook. The tip of the ice sword disintegrated, making the sword lean over as the glowing mana remnants dispersed.

*This strange torrent of mana bothers me. It seems the construction strength of Icicle Sword can be interfered with.* The faint mana from when Lettie had cast Crimson Eyes could be sensed more clearly now. The Fiend had likely either unleashed its mana to block it, or had used some kind of spell.

The next moment—dozens of thin arms attacked from underground.

"—Damn monster!" Alus had had a bad feeling about this ever since he'd seen the right arm change shape so freely. It was impossible for a normal Roscarg. It was like its body was made out of black sludge... the Fiend had probably transformed into something else entirely, its body included.

While dodging the countless arms, Alus cut them off with his knife, but each time he did so, the thing would bubble and sprout out another arm with four fingers. There was no end to it no matter how many arms he cut.

Alus came to that realization as he kicked off from a tree, spinning his body around to dodge all of the arms reaching out to him. From what he could see, the squad was also struggling to deal with the countless arms.

Lettie was burning the arms, along with the ground itself, but they weren't reducing in number at all. Overwhelmed, even she was starting to slowly fall back.

It wasn't clear if it was some kind of extreme regeneration or division, but it was surely the result of an abnormal evolution. It was completely unheard of for a normal Variant to turn out like that. And Rinne, who lacked experience in fighting Fiends, probably wasn't going to be able to keep up.

Before anyone died, Alus shouted out, "Jump!" Grabbing hold of his AWR's chain, he spun around with Night Mist, slashing all of the black arms around him in a circle, and then immediately reined it in. Night Mist's blade stabbed into the ground, as if making to pull Alus in after it.

Of course, Alus wasn't pulled in. At the same time that it hit the ground, Alus stepped on the handle and pushed it deeper in. The squad members all realized what he was intending to do, and jumped high up to avoid touching the ground.

"<<Niflheim>>"

With the AWR at its center, the scenery rapidly turned into a world of ice. Only frozen statues of the black arms remained, like some kind of avant-garde art sculpture.

Alus planned on using one of his standard combinations, crushing the Fiend with Railpine, but there was no need for that. The squad members who jumped up realized what he was doing, and unleashed spells at full force ahead of him to crush the frozen arms.

*That's an elite squad for you.* They were all skilled Magicmasters, and already knew about the properties of the expert-level spell Niflheim. That's how they were so quick to follow up on it.

This was a refreshing feeling for Alus, who'd primarily been fighting alone. This way he'd be able to save his own mana and avoid all kinds of extra work. "Change to delta formation."

Delta formation was one of the military's basic formations. It was typically used by a company or more, and took on the form of a triangle. It worked well for retreating battles and for protecting VIPs.

For example, if there was a risk of the entire squad being wiped out, the highest-ranking person would be put in the rear to keep the damage to a bare minimum. And the members at the end of the triangle would serve as the rear guard, buying as much time as possible. When guarding someone, that person would end up in the back of the pack.

In this case, they clearly weren't retreating. In other words, they were to protect their charge, and the squad members nodded in midair before rushing to take positions when they landed. As Alus had wanted, they formed a wall with Rinne in the rear.

"Good. Sajik, Mujir, you're hunting this thing with me and Lettie."

"Finally, the time to show my stuff has come!" Sajik rolled up his sleeves and flashed a fearless smile. From the looks of it, he was a powerful veteran, but to Alus, he seemed to project more style than substance.

"Don't mess it up, Sajik. We're going to support them to keep it from getting past us." Mujir had accurately grasped Alus' intention and reminded Sajik of his job.

"You got it!" Sajik replied with gusto, but Alus couldn't help but smile wryly, seeing as he was still letting his mana flow freely. Sajik's AWRs were boorish gauntlets he wore over his fists, while Mujir's were silver tonfas with pointed ends.

"It's a Variant Roscarg, but I more or less get its nature. So let's wrap this up quick." Lettie was stroking her thin bracelet, while moving her wrist around to loosen it up.

"What's that? Did you have an AWR like that?" Alus asked, since it wasn't the usual rings she used.

"Hee hee, I'm not really good at group battles, so I use something like this instead." At Lettie's laugh, all four of them suddenly focused on a point in front of them.

The next moment, the frozen ground rose up, shattering the thin wall of ice, as the Roscarg revealed itself.

Its sludge-like body had been hiding underground, but with the numerous hands that had sprouted out of its two arms having been frozen, it had come out in a fit of anger. Now it had no arms, apparently having torn them off for getting in the way.

Despite its arms being cut off, it showed no signs of anguish. But without its arms, its balance was shot and it staggered as it moved, making for an almost laughable sight.

"What's with that? Does it think it can fight like that?" Lettie held back a snicker.

The area around the lost arms began to bubble. And in the next moment it rippled, as the Fiend's sludge-like body welled up and new arms were regenerated.

"It really does look like a monster when you see it do that... how disgusting," Lettie said, wrinkling her nose.

"Cut the chatter and let's get to work. We don't have much time, either." Alus readied Night Mist, but was stopped by Lettie's hand on his arm.

"I'll go first. It'd be faster to see this with your own eyes... The rest of you get that too?" On Lettie's arm was a bracelet emitting a faint platinum light. It appeared to be engraved with a minimal mana formula. Alus didn't know what metal it was made of.

Following that, Lettie thrust forth both hands, and the rings on her thumb and middle finger began glowing brightly. Sparks flew, and in the next moment there was a large explosion around the Roscarg's chest.

It was a point-blank attack from Crimson Eyes. Even if it had a monstrous amount of stamina, it shouldn't be able to get out of this in one piece.

Of course, Crimson Eyes being a wide area attack spell, the explosion ran the risk of hurting allies.

Despite the explosion hitting the Fiend's chest, the shockwave and flames were approaching Alus and the others... but nobody who called himself a Single would fail to take that into account. Assuming Lettie had a plan, Alus simply looked on.

In a fraction of a second—the explosion stopped its expansion. And instead, it started shrinking back to its origin point as if it were reversing through time.

The body of the Fiend at the center of the explosion was burned, with a portion being carbonized, and an unpleasant smell blew towards them with a scorching hot wind.

*The spell's construct is being rewound... which means... "Meteor metal, huh."*

"That's my Allie for you! I guess I don't need to explain," Lettie said, exhaling.

"Yeah, there're some details I'd like to ask about, but I more or less understand after seeing that." The AWR on her bracelet reversed the magic formula after a spell was cast, rather than disassembling it. With that, the range of the spell could be controlled, which prevented allies from getting caught up in the spell. This was only made possible because it was meteor metal.

"But it seems it wasn't enough to fatally damage it." From what Alus could see, the Fiend was hurt, but the damage wasn't decisive.

"The coordinate designation is pretty severe, but I guess that's not an excuse...?" Lettie scratched her cheek, but from what Alus could tell, that wasn't the essence of it. She might have called the designation severe, but she hadn't made any mistakes.

The reason probably lay with the overwhelming amounts of mana within the Fiend. Crimson Eyes used a special formula to designate coordinates inside of the target to explode. Those coordinates were added in a separate part from the construction process.

In other words, it was a spell that was activated by putting the construction of the spell itself together with the coordinate designation. In a sense, it was a fusion of two spells. Because of that characteristic, the coordinate information of the target was important for the effective use of the spell, but...

"It has the ability to harden its body... and it was crushed by its overwhelming mana," Alus noted. In a space that was filled with someone else's mana, the constructions were much more rigid, and the more dense the mana was, the more it interfered with others' spells.

As Lettie had attempted to set the coordinates of Crimson Eyes inside of the Fiend, the abnormal amount of mana inside of it had thrown the coordinate designation off. As a result, Lettie's spell hadn't gone off deep within the Fiend as intended, but rather near its skin, not dealing any effective damage to it.

However, it seemed the spell had still exploded somewhat inside of the Fiend, as a portion of its chest had burst open. Its posture was also slightly off-balance, which stopped its movements for a moment. But even though black smoke was rising from its wound, it had already begun regenerating.

Suddenly, Sajik clanked the gauntlets covering his arms together. When he did, electric sparks shot out, creating a field, which he used to cover his fists with electricity.

At the same time, Mujir readied his tonfa AWRs, and signaled Sajik with his eyes.

Deciding to launch a second attack before the injury could be fully healed, they took off, and in an instant they split to the left and to the right, closing in fast.

"—!!" As Sajik took quick strides forward, a massive red eyeball-like globe appeared before him. Immediately identifying what it was, he crossed his gauntlets in front of his face to protect himself.

And moments later the red globe exploded without warning. It created red flames and black smoke, covering his entire surroundings in a second. At the same time, the shockwave easily sent Sajik's massive frame flying.

Alus was the first to realize what had happened. It was a spell that the Fiend had used. But it wasn't like Sajik had let his guard down either. It was simply that Fiends showed next to no signs when they used magic, because they used their bodies to fulfill the same functions as AWRs. They could do spells without constructing magic formulas.

In fact, in the sense that they could employ spells freely without AWRs, Fiends were closer to achieving perfected magic. The reason humanity had been able to create attack spells was because they'd researched what Fiends did, and turned it into weapons they could use. Fiends were the original masters of magic.

Sajik had been sent flying, but thanks to his quick reflexes, he'd protected himself from the worst of it.

Alus clicked his tongue in frustration. "Hey, Lettie. It's stealing your moves."

"Looks like it... It's adapting magic way too fast." Surprisingly enough, the spell Sajik had been hit by was the same Crimson Eyes that Lettie had used. Fortunately, it hadn't set its coordinates as accurately as Lettie had, making its activation incomplete, which prevented the mimicked spell from exhibiting full power.

As smoke rose from its mouth, the Roscarg's lips distorted into what looked like a twisted smile. If this Fiend had feelings, it was surely smiling sadistically at being able to lord its power over the weak. Even as it did, its cells were regrowing at a visible pace, flesh covering its wounded chest before finally hardening over.

The Roscarg's jaw shook as it opened its mouth wide. It roared with scorn at the weak, boasting of its fully recovered body. With the intent of enjoying the hunt, the Fiend attempted to slowly move towards Alus and the others... but it couldn't budge.

*"<<Restriction Marsh>>"*

Mujir had cast a spell. It was a limiting type spell that converted an area into a marsh, which was especially effective against large opponents. He'd glanced over when Sajik was getting blown away, but understood what he had to do and fulfilled his mission without hesitation.

With its legs caught in the terrain, the Roscarg's body began to tilt over. Because of its weight, it slowly sank into the ground.

Seeing the Fiend stopped in its tracks, Sajik ran over and leapt over the magical marshland. Faint smoke still rose from his body, but he was more or less fine, as one might expect from him.

In front of the Roscarg's face, Sajik swung down his fists, which were draped in lightning.

*"Begone—<<Thunderbolt Fist>>"*

The thunderbolt let out a monstrous sound, and Sajik also shouted at the same time. His fists had the power to pulverize boulders... yet despite hitting the human equivalent of the solar plexus, his fists bounced off of the Fiend like he'd hit solid rock.

He clicked his tongue, kicking off from the Fiend's chest, and using the recoil to retreat backward. "It's harder than I thought!" he said with irritation, though seeing how he'd managed to shatter its outer shell again, Alus muttered words of admiration.

Sajik's affinity was for lightning, but his specialty was physical enhancement. He could even use Force, as he'd shown when jumping, so he was rather dexterous despite his rugged appearance.

Meanwhile, Mujir was a pretty interesting Magicmaster. Alus had wondered why he was part of this elite squad when he first saw his details, but he understood after seeing his movements just now.

Mujir had an affinity for water and for earth. There were quite a few capable Magicmasters that could use two attributes. But just being able to use them wasn't worth much in actual combat. Mediocre to the lower end of the higher ranks in terms of results was usually as good as they got.

Not only was Mujir skilled, but he was blessed with talent as well. He could combine liquids to create acids or poisons. And by combining the water and earth attributes—while others before him could create marshlands, in Alus' eyes, his was a rare existence.

He'd expected Lettie's right-hand men to have a trick or two up their sleeves, but their combination was rather unexpected. They were both Double Digits, so these probably weren't the only tricks they had, but at the moment all they needed to do was to stall the Fiend.

The Roscarg, bent backwards from Sajik's fists, quickly righted itself. Fury burned in its eyes, its mouth wide open, and it faced the first thing to enter its sight, which was Alus.

"—!!" By the time Alus saw light deep in its mouth, it was already flying towards him at high speed. In a moment, he threw his hand forward and raised five layers of translucent anti-magic barriers along the line of its travel.

The light was blindingly bright. This was most likely a high-energy ray of light. The ray quickly reached the barriers, which stopped it, dispersing it into particles.

An ear-splittingly loud noise rang out as the ray grew weaker, and eventually disappeared.

Considering his position, if Alus had dodged it, the ray could have turned Rinne and the others into ash. Though it appeared that three of the five barriers Alus threw up had been pierced.

This was the most troublesome part of battling a dangerous Fiend. The ray of light wasn't so much magic as it was mana converted into heat and expelled. So missing any signs of attack would put one at a severe

disadvantage. One needed to be constantly aware of the flow of mana around a Fiend, and deal immediately with any changes.

Taking into account all of the moves and abilities of the Fiends he'd fought, Alus muttered, "This is it."

Rinne, behind him, nodded, and Lettie agreed as well. "It's got far greater specs than normal Variants. This has gotta be that Devourer, huh?"

"Yeah. Seeing the way its body has changed, how quickly it adapts to magic, and most of all—this amount of mana. There's still something that bothers me, though..."

A Roscarg's body was too small of a vessel for the amount of mana and density of information this one had. To be honest, this was the biggest question on Alus' mind, but fortunately it seemed the Devourer hadn't fully absorbed all of the mana it had taken in.

"It's now or never. Our magic might get stolen, so we need to finish this fast."

"Gotcha!!" Lettie's answer felt lacking in sincerity, but the mana she was exuding made it clear she was in her serious combat mode. When it came to Singles, they had an almost monstrous amount of mana themselves, regardless of what spells they knew. The dense amounts of mana being emitted had a glow that could practically be seen with the naked eye, and Lettie's was filled with her fighting spirit.

Alus' own mana had no such glow, and was closer to a freezing cold. Some Magicmasters even got shivers from what felt like an infinite amount of mana welling up from a bottomless abyss.

Mana contained a lot of information. Be it emotions, temperament, or disposition, in a sense it was a direct projection of the Magicmaster. That's why *void* was the only expression that could describe the mana Alus wielded. It was mana that completely lacked anything one would expect from a human.

"You guys are backup. We'll clean this up."

"Understood!"

"Got it!"

Mujir saluted Alus by reflex, and Sajik nodded firmly. Both were breaking out in a cold sweat from the mana Lettie and Alus were clad in.

And it wasn't just on the surface, either... a quick glance at that mana was enough to tell that these two Singles had vast amounts of power.

"They're terrifying people," Mujir unconsciously blurted out, but he couldn't help himself. He and Sajik were both Doubles, so there really shouldn't be such a big gap between them. But when faced with this overwhelming difference in strength, what could they do...?

Seeing Mujir stiffen up, Sajik casually called out to him, "Don't space out, Mujir!"

"I don't need you telling me that. I'll hit any openings perfectly so as not to get in their way."



Before long, Alus' and Lettie's combination attack began. The extreme atmosphere around them kept the tense squad members from doing anything. An intense close combat fight between Single Digit Magicmasters and the Fiend was taking place before them.

"You say that, but how are we gonna do anything like this?" Sajik asked, admiring the two, and Mujir completely agreed.

"I thought you specialized in close combat," Mujir said. "In fact, that's the only thing you got going for you, so why don't you go help them out?"

"Don't be stupid. I fall behind when coordinating with the captain. And I can't believe that now she's the one who looks like she's falling behind. I'd just get in the way if I went in there," Sajik retorted.

That said, it was their job to support the Singles if there was an opening. So they kept their eyes fixed on the target and on full alert, even as they exchanged insults.

Several minutes had passed since Alus and Lettie began fighting the Roscarg. If they took the Fiend's attack head on, it would be fatal, but neither acted like they were in danger.

Lettie was unarmed aside from her rings, but whenever she saw an opening she'd damage the Fiend's body and outer shell through strikes and small explosions.

Meanwhile, Alus was wielding his Night Mist, and using a mana blade on top of it to extend its reach to tear apart the enemy's shell.

Despite that, the Fiend's regenerative strength was frightening. The damage it took healed up in the blink of an eye.

"... A Devourer's a terrifying thing. Not only is its shell stupidly hard, but if it's going to wildly use magic like that, even those two will have a hard time attacking it," Mujir said.

"... I don't even want to think about how many Magicmasters that thing's eaten," Sajik replied.

Just as Lettie was about to drive her fist into the Fiend, its shell sprouted thorns to attack her. She'd have preferred to use an explosion to blow them away, but she knew that would only end up in a draw at best.

Instead, the two took it a step further. Before Lettie was impaled on the thorns, Alus grabbed her hand and pulled her over to him.

Changing her posture in midair, Lettie used the centrifugal force to spin around Alus, and with that momentum she drove a powerful kick into the Roscarg's flank.

She used the recoil to get away, and as her foot left its body, the impact location exploded, pushing the Fiend's body backwards.

But even that damage healed after a mere moment. As they expected, the Fiend's regenerative powers were too strong for regular attacks. It seemed it also picked up resistance for every time it healed, as Lettie's explosions were becoming less effective over time.

"There's no end to this," Lettie complained.

"I've cut off its arms at least a dozen times. It'll be a war of attrition at this rate."

The two didn't even get a break to speak, as the Fiend angrily roared and rushed towards Lettie. The rough breaths coming from its nose weren't a sign of exhaustion, but visible frustration.

Typically, the only effective way to eliminate a Fiend was to destroy its core. Ever since they'd encountered it, Rinne had been searching for the core that was supposed to be inside its body. And yet, even with her abilities, its location remained hidden. Its form was indeterminate to begin with, and its body was filled with dense mana, getting in the way of detection.

Alus and Lettie were both striking with the intent of destroying that core, but with its location obscured, a certain hypothesis occurred to them.

"It might be the type that can freely move the core around its body," Alus said.

"Or it might be somewhere way underneath. Either way, we haven't dealt any damage that really goes deep."

"That's true. So, who goes first?"

Realizing Alus' intentions, Lettie grinned. "I wouldn't mind going," she said, with an out-of-place mischievous look.

Seeing that, Alus sighed. She really loved being flashy. At any rate—*After fighting it, the only thing I'd call worthy of an S-class is its amount of mana. Though that regeneration deserves a special mention...* To be honest, he felt this assessment was somehow incomplete, though.

Meanwhile, the Roscarg suddenly took a big step forward, slamming its foot down. Sharp thorns of ice the size of swords were created by its foot, spreading out at a frightening speed.

Alus took note of them, but immediately understood that they weren't all that powerful. At the very least, they were at a far smaller scale than he'd anticipated when he'd first heard he'd be going up against a Devourer.

For the time being, Alus and Lettie quickly reacted to the approaching thorns of ice. Lettie jumped back, leaving Alus behind. He didn't show any signs of dodging, as the chain from his AWR bundled up into a clump and floated in front of him.

"<<Railpine>>"

On top of that, he casually swung his AWR. The shockwave created by the swing flew towards the ice thorns. This was pretty much a side effect of the original spell that was meant to target a wide area.

But thanks to Alus' precise control, he used only a portion of its effect, unleashing it as a wave. Even though he was holding back his strength, it easily broke through the approaching ice.

The sound of breaking glass rang out. Soon it could no longer maintain its physical form, and the ice covering the area disappeared.

The spell the Fiend had cast was yet another imitation... an inferior version of Niflheim. It had managed to take in a lot of mana information, but

it wasn't able to properly construct the spell. A Fiend's perfect magic attempting to replicate a human's imperfect magic resulted in a degraded and thus inferior form of it.

The shards of ice hailed down in front of Alus, turning into mana remnants. Swinging Night Mist, he rushed through the falling light of mana remnants, an instant later reaching the Roscarg. His AWR, still in midswing, cut into the Roscarg's thick chest.

A moment later, the Roscarg swung its massive arm in response, but Alus used his chain to wrap around and constrict it. It tried to use its other arm to crush him, but Alus' chain quickly wrapped around that arm as well, fixing it in place behind its back.

Deprived of its freedom, the more the Fiend struggled to break free, the deeper the chain dug into it. As it violently shook its body, unsettling green blood spilled from the wound in its chest.

With the Roscarg bound, Lettie put her hand on Alus' shoulder and jumped over him. "This is gonna get a little hot." Using mana focused in her finger, she drew characters in the air, and unleashed them at the Roscarg's chest. As she did, the mark was burned into its chest like a brand.

Meanwhile, having carved his blade into the Roscarg, Alus' sense that something was off grew even stronger. No matter how much mana a Fiend might have, it would consume some of it whenever it used magic. But he felt something strange was happening in that process.

More specifically, there was a fraction of a second's delay between when mana was consumed and when it used magic. If one assumed there was an additional step in the construction process, though, it would make more sense. However, he didn't know why that would be.

Variants were already almost beyond human understanding, but Alus' instincts told him there was something even more unsettling about this enemy. It was like he wasn't fighting the Roscarg in front of him, but something unknown beyond it.

That doubt only lasted for a moment. Shaking the thoughts off, he called out to Lettie. "Think you can do it?"

"Sure thing!"

Contrary to Lettie's cheerful tone, her expression when she glanced over her shoulder was serious. The next moment, her eyes began to glow as dense mana welled up. Her braid danced in the air and she put her hands together. *How many seconds can I restrain it for...?*

Realizing what Lettie was going to do, Alus undid the chains and switched to space manipulation magic to restrain the Roscarg instead. He shifted his AWR to his other hand, and held out his right hand as if holding something.

As if linked to his actions, an invisible force squeezed the Roscarg's arms to its body, like an unseen giant hand holding the Roscarg down. The Roscarg was putting up a fierce struggle, so Alus put more strength into his hand.

Next to him, Lettie constructed her spell with a smooth voice. Her face was expressionless due to the intense focus needed to put together the strongest class of spell she could use.

“Great Spirit of Blue Flames, through the flames of hell, return all that is named to ash...” Her voice was clear and powerful, each word reverberating with strength and firmly building up the spell.

Finally she wrapped up the spell by incanting the trigger. “Make their body tremble in the fires of the end...!!”

“—Oh shit!!” Hearing the incantation, Sajik realized what spell Lettie was going to use, and a terrified expression appeared on his face.

Mujir also tensed up, but both relaxed as Alus put up a barrier in front of them. Rinne and the other squad members guarding her all put up barriers of their own, with Alus’ barrier covering them completely.

In the next instant, six ferociously burning azure flames appeared like will o’ wisps around Lettie. All of the rings on Lettie’s fingers glowed, her palms touching one another were sweaty, and the six flames in a half-circle around her were wavering in the wind. They were like the spirits of the dead coming out of the underworld.

“<<Kagatsuchi>>”

The Lost Spell on the Roscarg’s chest rose up like a target, with sparks scattering about.

“One...” As if responding to her voice, one of the will o’ wisps flared up and then disappeared. At the same time, a blue flame rose up from the Lost Spell, covering the huge body.

“Two... three...” The blue flame flared up even more, looking like the temperature was rising.

But strangely enough, the fire didn’t spread elsewhere. It targeted only the Roscarg, a magic flame that existed solely to burn it to ash.

After seeing it through to the end, Alus released his clenched hand and removed the restraints from the Roscarg. His hand was sweating from having put so much force into it, but there was no point in binding it anymore.

The Roscarg, embraced by the flames, closed its eyes and painfully put its hands over its face. It shrank back as if trying to escape the fire, but that was impossible. Eventually, the blue flames wrapped around its body like a snake.

“It’s no use. There’s no escaping that flame.” Like Lettie said, the engraved Lost Spell was the origin of the flame. It was as if the Fiend’s body itself was the firewood that fueled the fire. And the blue flame wouldn’t go out until all six will o’ wisps had disappeared.

“Four... five...”





A pillar of fire extended into the sky, and the heated atmosphere became a current that mixed in with the surrounding air and soon turned into a storm.

The Fiend's body began to dissolve and gradually turned red. Its arm was already hanging down and carbonized, and each time the flames flared up, more dripped off. But no matter how carbonized it got, it never reached the ground. It turned to dust and disappeared. Soon, blue flames even rose from the Fiend's lifeless eyes.

With a deep breath, Lettie released her clasped hands, reaching one hand forward.

"And... six!"

Blue flames burst out from inside of the Roscarg, and it slumped to its knees like a ragdoll. Both arms had already been burned to cinders. The impact from collapsing to its knees knocked odd ends off of its blackened body. It just barely maintained its original form, likely due to its S-class outer shell.

"Did that get it?!" A bead of sweat ran down Lettie's chin, and of course it would. Kagatsuchi had severe conditions to be met before it could be cast, but it had exceptional power among the expert level spells. And to make up for that, it cost just as much in mana. Its power alone rivaled even vertex magic.

After all, in order to activate a spell, she needed to come in contact with the target's body and engrave a complex magic formula. Because of that, she couldn't afford to waste any mana, and was left practically defenseless when casting it.

"I'm not so sure... you should step back a little. Those two can finish up for you," Alus said.

"Sorry 'bout that. But I can't imagine that wouldn't kill it."

"That would be nice... but considering what we're up against, it's hard to tell."

"Good work out there, Captain," Mujir said. "Leave the cleanup to us."

Without waiting for Alus to finish, Sajik and Mujir stepped up, Mujir with his tonfas ready and Sajik clanking his gauntlets together.

"But if you're going to do something like that, could you give us a warning next time?" Sajik complained.

"You knew that you wouldn't get hurt, right?" Lettie asked.

"Of course! But even if the flames don't touch us, the heat's enough to give us a burn. Unlike you and Sir Alus, we can't use mana control alone to protect us from the heat," Mujir told her.

Calling them unskilled would be cruel. It was common for mana control to be low on the list of priorities for most Magicmasters, so unless they were Singles, their skills would be inferior.

"Oh well, it's been a while since I last used it, so I kinda forgot, ha ha ha."

Sajik and Mujir stared at her with some resentment, but soon shrugged in resignation. "Fortunately, nobody's hurt, so hurry up and get some rest," Sajik said, pointing behind himself with his thumb.

Just after Lettie walked away and started wiping her sweat on her sleeve

—  
"Sir Alus!! It's not over yet!" Rinne's panicked voice immediately froze the relaxed atmosphere.

With tense expressions, they all stared at the burnt Roscarg's body. Even Lettie stiffened up as she looked on in disbelief.

There was no way it could still move after that. Its body had been turned to ash. And even if it was a Fiend, its body was no longer capable of being a vessel for mana. It shouldn't be anything other than 'what was once a Fiend.'

Yet everyone could see the inexplicable mystery taking place before them. They rejected what was happening in front of them, their bodies frozen in place.

The Roscarg's body, which shouldn't even have been able to stand, had made its move... it grew four arms of ice from the edge of its body. Without giving the group any time to react, dragon-like heads sprouted from the ends of the arms, and assaulted Alus and the others with great force.

"Allie!! That's Gileada's Mizuchi!" Lettie cried.

"Tsk!" Alus, being the closest, had two of the heads attack him, while the remaining heads went around him to go after Sajik and Mujir.

Even as they approached, the dragon heads grew bigger and bigger, and were now already large enough to swallow a person whole.

With a crunching sound of ice, the heads bit down on Alus from above in an instant. Dirt was kicked up as they crashed into each other and gouged out the ground. The necks must have been exuding an intense cold as the cloud of dirt froze over and turned into ice crystals.

Alus jumped back, but the wild ice dragons froze everything in their path as they chased after him. While dodging backwards, he pulled the chain on his AWR. Finding the ring he was after, he immediately poured mana into it.

As they hunted Alus with their mouths wide open, the ice dragons crashed and tangled with each other as they kept growing bigger.

The next moment, several rock walls rose up from the ground, standing in between Alus and the ice dragons. However... as he expected, Mizuchi was a far higher level spell and the walls didn't even serve to slow them down. The rocks froze in an instant and the ice dragons crashed through them.

As to be expected from Gileada's specialty, it was an expert level spell and its power was overwhelming. Not only had the Roscarg not been killed, it could even use spells at this level. Unlike the inferior Crimson Eyes and Niflheim copies, this was almost a perfect replica.



*On top of that—it was using four spells of this scale at the same time. Only Fiends could cast perfected magic like this... we're no match when it comes to the strength of the construct.*

Despite the situation, Alus wasn't panicking in the slightest. In fact, he wore a composed smile. Approaching him were spells beyond the capability of humans in their true perfected form. That's why he couldn't help but find them beautiful.

Alus was elated. He pulled the chain with all his might and swung Night Mist at full speed. Stretching out wasn't the usual mana blade, but a vibrating and invisible wave. Most who witnessed the sight would've doubted their eyes, as the ice dragons made from expert level magic were torn apart like paper.

The cut itself was also abnormal. After all, space itself had been cut and shifted.

However, the ferocious Mizuchi bodies had been easily shattered into pieces as proof that it wasn't an illusion or hallucination.

As they turned into glowing mana remnants, only Alus remained standing. But for now, his attention had shifted elsewhere. "Are you okay?" he called out to Sajik and Mujir, turning to them.

Alus had only cut down two of the Mizuchi. And he'd seen the two other heads go after Sajik and Mujir out of the corner of his eye. He was thinking that it wasn't too serious, but Mujir at least seemed to have been caught off guard.

"I'm sorry, Sir Alus. It got the better of me," Mujir said with ragged breathing, as he pressed against his bleeding abdomen.

"I misread the situation," Alus replied, with some bitterness. A perfected expert level spell had attacked them with precise timing and they weren't skilled enough to handle that. Having them take to the front in Lettie's place had backfired. Perhaps he should've just had them focus on dodging.

"Hah, you're getting sloppy, Mujir." Sajik cracked a joke, despite being covered in wounds from the Mizuchi's attack himself. Blood was dripping from all over, and his arms, legs, chest, and face had frost covering them. He'd used Force in conjunction with offensive magic, while fighting back the ice dragon heads with his bare hands. Grabbing both dragon heads' chins, he'd been unable to hold his ground.

And seeing that, Mujir said, exasperated, "You're far worse off. Those arms and legs are a mess, aren't they?"

"This is nothing!" Sajik said. But it seemed he'd taken a lot of damage from Force's side effects as well as from the Mizuchi.

As for the Roscarg who could use that kind of spell... it was still collapsed on its knees and in a charred form... yet it hadn't turned to ash like Fiends with their cores destroyed did. Rinne could sense it with her detection, and worst of all, it could still cast spells.

However, there was no way Alus would've overlooked it if it had so much as twitched. *What's going on...?* There was no time to bask in victory as these thoughts ran through his mind.

When Alus took another look at the Roscarg, it still looked dead. No matter where its core had been, it should have been burned away by Lettie's Kagatsuchi.

The Fiend's body was slowly turning to ash and being blown away by the wind. It looked deceased to anyone watching, the signs were all there... but it was impossible for a dead Fiend to use magic.

Which meant that Rinne wasn't sensing the Fiend itself, but a vast amount of mana still within its body for some reason, even though there weren't any visible leaks of mana.

And the answer that could be concluded from that... was...

Before Alus could finish the thought, he sensed everything from Rinne's pale expression and swallowed his words.

There was no doubt. The Fiend was still alive. And once he was convinced of that, Alus caught sight of a slight movement from the corner of his eye.

"You guys fall back and focus on healing!" Noticing the change, Alus immediately ordered Sajik and Mujir to retreat. The Fiend had been turning to ash, but the process had abruptly stopped, and it still had more than half of its torso.

A strange sound came from the Roscarg's swelling abdomen. Its outer shell cracked and spread out in all directions like a spider's web. Something was moving inside of it... and before long a piece of the outer shell fell to the ground, kicking up soot.

The Roscarg's outer shell was falling to pieces, like some kind of abnormal chicken was being hatched from an ashen egg.

It was a bizarre sight. Everyone was motionless as they watched what was happening.

As a particularly large piece of the shell fell, they caught a glimpse of something... or rather, *it* caught a glimpse of *them* through an ominous glowing point. All froze and held their breaths as they stared.

"Wha—!! No way!" Lettie unconsciously shouted, shrinking back a step.

A strange creature was clearly about to emerge from the Roscarg's crumpled stomach. Something was peeking out from a hollow void that was darker than shadows. White spots of light, like eyes, flickered inside the void egg of what was once the Roscarg.

And finally—

"Wuuu..."

A guttural vibrating sound that didn't come from the throat, but rather some weird kind of membrane, roared and made the air tremble.

Mujir huddled up in surprise, almost letting go of his tonfa AWRs.

"This has to be some kind of joke. W-What is that...?" Rinne said.

"This is bad. Ms. Rinne..." Cold sweat ran down Lettie's back, and she turned to Rinne in the hope that she could at least designate a rank for it.

"N-N... Nooo!! No, no, no... ah... ah... ah... urk." Rinne's skin was already pale as it was, but now she was white as a corpse. She gasped for air, hyperventilating, and was on the verge of throwing up. Even her eyes were blurring.

Seeing her reaction, anyone would understand that what was hiding inside of the Roscarg, or what was perhaps disguising itself as it—was the real Devourer.

Being able to accurately sense mana, Rinne could feel the overwhelming difference in power between them. Having eaten hundreds of Magicmasters, its terrifying pressure was being directly applied to her senses.

Seeing Rinne like this, Lettie realized it was her fault. She'd gotten carried away, thinking she'd eliminated it. "Al... Captain," she said with a serious expression.

She was prepared for death. The next move would likely decide the fate of everyone here. Her eyes made that clear enough.

"Yeah, there's no doubt. That's an SS-class for sure," Alus said. The twisted mana was so dense and overpowering he could feel it on his skin. This Fiend was clearly different from any he'd fought before, which made his heart pound.

"But... what do we do? We can't handle that with just us!" Lettie exclaimed.

"C-Captain, Lettie's right. This isn't something a single nation can handle..."

"H... Hey, Mujir, it's Sir Alus who decides that, not us," Sajik cut in to interrupt Mujir's timid reaction, though even *his* voice was trembling. But he did have a point. Sajik didn't think this was something a single nation's elites could handle.

But they were already beyond that. Alus knew what to do. There had never been any other choice to begin with. Even now, the Roscarg's cavity expanded, and three fingers appeared around the edge as if to pull it open further.

"I-If we're going to retreat, it has to be now... if we can buy even a second of time..." Mujir said with what vigor he could muster, but Alus didn't react. As if to urge him on, he spoke again with a timid voice, "S-Sir Alus!!"

*Could even the ranked No. 1 have been befuddled by this irregularity?* Mujir wondered, peeking at his face. In the next moment, his own face turned pale with shock. "—!!"

Alus had ferocious eyes. The eyes of a hunter, without a trace of fear. Like he was waiting for his prey to come out of its nest... There was even a smile on his face.

"Allie?" Lettie said in a questioning voice.

Finally, as if returning to his senses at last, Alus turned his attention to his subordinates. "Yeah, you guys can go ahead and retreat."

"—!!" Lettie, Mujir, and Sajik reacted. Mujir said, "Sir Alus, you don't mean... you're going to fight it alone?!"

"Obviously. You don't come across an SS-class every day. What better opponent could I ask for when going all out?" In a seemingly satisfied gesture, Alus pulled his chin back, with a fearless smile on his lips. In his eyes was an almost innocent light, like a child who had found a new toy. Depending on the person, they might even question if he was sane. "Even if it's a mission, I'll need to fight someone with a backbone every once in a while, or my skills will dull. Not to mention this is my first time seeing this type. I don't know if it's a parasite or if it disguised itself, but it's clear that this thing was waiting inside of the Roscarg for a strong prey."

Alus looked like he'd finally figured out the mystery behind the Fiend's massive amount of mana in spite of its lacking vessel, and why there had been a delay when it cast magic. The answer to all of his doubts had taken form in front of his eyes. "If we run here, that thing is going to give chase. In that case, there'll be more casualties than expected. Especially against that kind of thing."

"Can you take it, Allie?"

"I wonder. But at least I don't feel like I'll lose."

"—!! Sir Alus, the risk is too high! We don't know how strong the enemy is either..." Mujir gave a logical and sound argument, but Sajik put his hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

Sajik spread his feet out shoulder-width apart, and stood in a very militaristic straight posture with his arms behind his back, unlike his usual behavior. It looked like he'd braced himself and was about to make a proposal to Alus. Seeing him posing like that, Alus decided to at least hear him out.

"Sir Alus, we are proud Magicmasters of Alpha. We could ask for nothing more than to stand at your and Lettie's sides. I am well aware that we lack strength, but I cannot imagine retreating and leaving you behind."

Mujir finally understood. As a subordinate, instead of second-guessing everything, he should have faith in his commander... Sajik stood as a model of the ideal embodiment of the soldier before him.

*To think he beat me to the punch.* Mujir wore a self-deprecating smile as he lined up next to Sajik with a respectful bow, as if he'd completely forgotten about the Fiend. "Forgive me for stepping out of bounds before. I share the same sentiment as Sajik... as do the rest of the squad here."

The squad members nodded one after another. Seeing that, Lettie muttered, "This is why men are so stupid..." with a wry smile.

She then changed her expression to that of a leader. "Right! In that case, we'll take it down even if it kills us!" she said, encouraging her motivated squad.

"Hey! You can be as passionate as you want, but don't touch it."

"Huh?"

The squad had been getting fired up, but Alus' words felt like having a bucket of cold water dumped over them. Lettie froze, while Sajik and Mujir were equally flabbergasted.

"... But if you're that enthusiastic, I can at least let you look on." Alus flashed the three a smile and continued, "You guys don't know why I've fought on my own all this time, do you? Well, now you'll get to see it with your own eyes." He pointed to the top of the deposit, which looked like a rocky mountain some distance away.

The damage shouldn't reach that far. It would be within eyeshot of the enemy, but Alus was confident that he'd be able to keep it from attacking them. On top of that, if this Devourer was waiting for worthy prey, it wasn't going to settle for anyone aside from someone with vast mana like Alus.

"Go on, get going before it comes out. I want to see what a legendary SS-class is really like to handle!"

Reluctantly accepting Alus' order, the squad cautiously began to retreat. And a moment later—

"Wuuuuuu..."

The Devourer stuck its feet out of the still small hole, breaking the shell apart, and finally appeared in its full glory. It reached its arm out and rubbed the four fingers of its hand together, getting a feel for its movement. Its entire body was covered in lustrous black skin, and it was on the relatively small side, reaching three meters high. The tail forked off into two at its end, and on each tip was a monstrous gaping mouth.

The face was flat with some kind of mucus forming a film on it, making it glisten. It had eye sockets like holes reflecting light, giving them the appearance of eyes. Running across the width of its face was a massive mouth, and it almost looked like it was smiling.

On its head was a deformed horn that extended backwards, making it look like a strange reptilian creature.

While odd, its form had a kind of simplicity and elegance to it. Not even Alus had seen such a perfected evolutionary form. He'd seen a lot of Fiends before, and he got a certain impression after seeing this one. And that was that perhaps all of the fantastical and fictional creatures in the stories of legends and myths had really originated from Fiends.

When Fiends ate humans, the mana information they took in included the victim's memories. His theory was that maybe the Fiends changed shape into those mythical creatures based on those memories.

There was also a theory that Fiends had existed in this world long before their emergence in massive numbers. For example, in the forms of supernatural beings such as devils, angels, gods and spirits, and so on. They didn't exist in reality, but perhaps people at the time had interpreted the Fiends as such.

That was, however, a bit of a leap. Scholars tended to lean towards the former theory. However, among believers were some heretics that

supported the latter. That meant that Fiends were older than human history, and thus higher beings of existence.

In fact, during the chaotic period in history when Fiends had first made their appearance in earnest, there had even been some who claimed they were creatures to be worshipped, and offered themselves or other sacrifices up to them. Even in the present day, there were cults that regarded Fiends as sacred, though their activities were typically prohibited and suppressed by the various nations.

But to Alus, such claims were delusions that hardly deserved a second thought. It wasn't as though he couldn't understand the desire to seek salvation in this world of despair from creatures that exceeded human knowledge. But if that was the case, why were they eating humans?

Considering the Magicmasters who fought and died in battle against Fiends, as well as the grief of the families left behind, gods that could only create suffering and offered up no salvation at all would be worthless in Alus' eyes. Showing them reverence was the last thing he would do. In fact, those kinds of ideas were nothing short of blasphemous towards the Magicmasters who had lost their lives.

Right now, the Devourer before him might have had the form of a devil, but he still saw it as nothing more than an abnormal monster to be put down.

*Will it really be able to tell where I am without eyes or a nose?* Alus threw off his cloak and unleashed his mana. He stared at the Fiend that was reacting to the mana torrent, as if to provoke it.

The Devourer's mouth tore open, revealing rows of teeth reaching all the way down to its throat. At the same time, it got down on all fours, raising its forked tail in the air. It brought its head low to the ground, as drool dripped out.

At the very moment Alus got ready to engage, the Devourer suddenly took off. With each step, it gouged out the earth, sending dirt and pebbles flying. And in the blink of an eye it closed the distance.

However—its target wasn't Alus. Instead, it was going after the squad that was retreating to the top of the mineral deposit.

Alus had figured the Devourer would prioritize him, seeing as how he had the most mana, but maybe it was chasing after the escaping prey out of bestial instinct. He quickly got in its way by stretching out his chain, but the Devourer seemed to have seen this coming, as it jumped up to a nearby branch and used it as a springboard to jump further.

Of course, Alus wasn't just going to watch that happen. He readied his AWR and aimed for where the Devourer would land—

—But... “—!!” With Night Mist's black blade at the ready, Alus swung at the Fiend. But faster than even Alus could notice, a figure abruptly appeared in front of him.

And it was Rinne, even though she was supposed to be in the rear of the delta formation some distance away.

The blade was stopped just before it could cut into her neck. Just what exactly had happened?

Rinne had tears in her eyes, showing how confused she was by this happening.

One beat later, the Fiend closed in on Alus and Rinne, its mouth wide open. If a person fell victim to that ferocious jaw, there wouldn't be much left of them.

"Shit!!" As the Devourer's mouth brushed against his body and he felt the mana remnants running along its skin, Alus understood what had happened to Rinne. *Space domination magic*. It was the kind of magic Alus was best at, magic that interfered with an object's existence, positional energy, and coordinate axis.

*Why the hell can this thing use Shuffle?!* Strictly speaking, the Devourer had used a spell that exceeded even that. It hadn't exchanged the coordinates and positional energy of two objects, but instead had forcibly moved Rinne through space.

Shocking as it was, Fiends were more adept at using magic than humans. As he thought about that, Alus was able to calm himself after losing his composure for a moment.

At the same time, he realized why the Fiend hadn't used it against himself, and immediately took measures against it. Space domination magic or not, it couldn't use it against Alus, who fixed his existence in place with magic. That's why it had targeted Rinne, who hadn't undergone special combat training.

While his brain ran at full speed, his body was making the optimal moves. His arm flashed, and Night Mist swung upwards.

"<<Dimension Thrust>>"

Alus didn't hesitate to use the same spell that had cut through Mizuchi, and swung his AWR. Yet it didn't cut the Fiend, but the space before him. Following the blade's trajectory, a line cut through space itself, shifting the scenery.

Sensing the danger, the Fiend slammed its forked tail into the ground to brake, and jumped to the side.

The shifted space soon repaired itself and returned to normal, but being able to fend off the Fiend for a second meant a lot. In that short break, Alus appeared in front of the frightened Rinne with his AWR ready.

Suddenly, countless blades of mana spinning around appeared. At the same time, he muttered the spell name as if whispering it into her ear.

"<<Hazy Swallow>>"

The 100 blades of mana pointed towards the Fiend were sent flying, Alus firing blade after blade without a break. The flashes of light mercilessly rained down on the Fiend.

Rinne was taken aback by the sight of countless small meteors descending on a single point, when she suddenly felt Alus' arm wrap around her waist. "Eek?!"

After the rain of light, Rinne was slowly lowered to the ground. And the arm tightly wrapped around her waist was removed. "Sorry, I never imagined it would be able to use Shuffle."

"T-Thank you..."

"Considering how coordinates are designated, once you're some way out of sight, it probably won't be able to use that spell again. And let the squad know that they should continuously release their mana to fix their position in space. You should be able to resist it to a degree if you keep rewriting your position information."

"I-I understand."

"Now go, hurry!"

Rinne bowed to Alus and took off for the deposit at full speed. Frustrating as it might be, there was nothing she could do if high-level spells were being exchanged. If she really slipped up, she'd be used by the Devourer and just end up as a burden.

Alus faced the Devourer once more, his back turned to Rinne.

As she anxiously looked back at Alus as she ran, a figure appeared at her side. It was Mujir, who'd gone looking for her.

Having finally found her, he exhaled and called out to her. "This way!" Mujir moved behind Rinne to shield her and apologized for his failure as the two of them ran, but she shook her head, giving him a brief explanation of what had happened.

When Rinne had suddenly disappeared, the squad had just barely spotted some remnants of magic and split up to search for her when Mujir, who'd been on his way to report to Alus, had happened upon her.

Mujir's expression grew stiff when he heard of the frightening magic the Devourer had used. It wasn't so much out of fear of becoming a victim of the spell, but rather worry for Alus who'd stayed behind.

Rinne spoke up to alleviate his concerns. "Don't worry. Sir Alus is the greatest Magicmaster. If he were to lose, humanity wouldn't stand a chance. The only difference would be how fast we'd face ruination. So we should watch over him from afar and pray that he'll be able to fight at full power."

"...! If that is what you say, I'm sure it is so... Forgive me, I'm sure being protected by someone so timid is worrisome. Please forget what you just heard."

"That's not true... but if that's what you want, I didn't hear anything."

Mujir was the type to err on the side of caution, and even in battle he would measure the difference in ability and calmly calculate his odds of victory, so it was no wonder he'd been so hesitant.

Rinne's words were those of a spotter whose job was to accurately search out information on the enemy, and guide Magicmasters to victory. The battle between Alus and the Devourer was already beyond the realm of even Alpha's best spotter to estimate, and seeing this was almost refreshing



for Mujir. Their commander stood at the heights of what may as well be called sacred ground, well beyond human knowledge.

He decided to believe in him. That was all he could really do. And if it came down to it—the entire squad would be prepared to strike back at the monster even if it killed them...

Before long, the two of them regrouped with Lettie and the others. It wasn't much farther to go until reaching the deposit. But the fierce sounds and signs of fighting behind them gave them the willies.

"I'm glad you're safe, Ms. Rinne! We're gonna hurry on over to the deposit."

Rinne nodded at Lettie's words, as she ran as fast as she could one step behind her. Even here there were signs of fighting, with claw marks and mowed-down trees, the ground upheaved and gouged out with holes.

Rinne scowled at the sight, while telling Lettie and the others how to counteract the Fiend's magic.

"I see... so that really was a spell it used..."

"So it seems. Sir Alus called it Shuffle."

"And now it's even using Shuffle! Doesn't seem like it's specializing in anything. It might not even have any affinities anymore..." Lettie mused.

"Captain, when you were using Kagatsuchi, the restraining magic that Sir Alus used on the Roscarg wasn't..." Mujir said, having noticed something.

Everyone soon realized what he was saying. None of them had ever seen or heard anything about a spell like that.

"Lady Lettie, Sir Alus is also a leading researcher on magic. I hear that he is almost solely responsible for the theory behind transfer gates as well."

"... Right. So maybe Allie doesn't have any affinity either... like he's attribute-less."

"..." Rinne silently pondered this, feeling it was very likely. When he'd saved her, he'd used a spell called Dimension Thrust. That one didn't belong to any of the attributes either. Cutting space... it was probably just what it sounded like. No matter how she viewed it, its power was overwhelming. Even the Devourer had hesitated to touch that cut, and it had also easily cut through the Mizuchi the Devourer had used before.

"But it seems even that Fiend can use attribute-less magic... it might be difficult to fight it even if all the Magicmasters came together. I feel bad for Allie, but we need to bring this information home or we'll be in trouble."

Rinne agreed with Lettie. Even if it was a previously unknown concept like Alus had said, so long as it was based on magic, there must be a means to resist it. But if they were to engage with it while unaware of it, even Singles might get killed immediately.

Lettie picked one of her fastest squad members and gave him orders to return to base no matter what. The information on this new magic and the threat of the Fiend that used it needed to reach the Governor-General as soon as possible.

*Meanwhile, Rinne was thinking of something else. An attribute only Sir Alus can use... my guess as to why he took on missions by himself wasn't too far off the mark. It's probably an attribute we didn't know about before.*

*She recalled how the magic that humanity used was something originally used by Fiends. But a number of Fiends clearly know about it, because they are the kings of magic. Not even Fiends, though, can so easily use the power of attribute-less magic... Fortunately there haven't been many Fiends of the same class as the calamity...*

Fiends were usually fixed in their established classes, but they could overcome that through eating. By absorbing mana and the information it contained, a Fiend might be able to use spells a Magicmaster knew through knowledge and experience. Of course, not all of them could. But that was why they were constantly a threat to humanity.

However, this could mean that the Devourer had eaten a user of attribute-less magic before...

But Rinne rejected the idea. After all, it was unknown territory even for a Single like Lettie. Indeed, Alus was the only exception.

*Having come that far in her thoughts, she reconsidered it. What if I think about it the other way? Why can Sir Alus use magic on the level that only the highest class of Fiends can use...? Did he simply reach that realm through his research?*

What stopped Rinne from thinking further was a shockwave, most likely the aftermath of an exchange of attacks between Alus and the Devourer, assaulting her from behind.

"They sure are going at it." Jumping sideways and covering Rinne, Lettie twirled around in the air, kicking off a nearby tree trunk and landing on a branch.

She put her hand over her narrowed eyes. That gesture wasn't so that she could peer far away. Something microscopic carried by the shockwave was blowing onto her.

"Huh? Sand?" Below the branch Lettie was on, Rinne rubbed the back of her hand and muttered in confusion. They were very fine grains of sand. The sensation was smooth and dry, making it something you wouldn't expect to see in a place filled with greenery.

Rinne wanted to use her magic eye to confirm what had happened, but quickly reined herself in. She'd determined that using it now would only serve to distract Alus.

Meanwhile, Lettie, who'd jumped up to an even taller tree, confirmed what was going on behind them, letting out a voice of wonder. "W-What is that... ha ha ha, to think I'd see a sand dune in the Outer World!"

"A-A sand dune?" Rinne asked.

"Yeah. The place where Allie is has turned into a full-on desert."

Reacting to Lettie's words, the squad members moved to see the sight for themselves.

“...!! T-That’s Helheim!” Mujir shouted out. In contrast with his usual calm demeanor, he was looking bewildered now.

“You know about it?” Lettie asked him.

“The complete version of it probably isn’t recorded in the spell encyclopedia. I’ve only ever heard rumors of it myself. Incidentally, the name comes from a fairy tale my mother read to me when I was young. It was a place created by a devil who opposed the creator of the world, and used the sand as its arms and legs.”

“I wonder who’s the real monster here...” Lettie said, smiling wryly.

Sajik called out to her. “Captain Lettie, look up! That’s bad news. We should go to the deposit now!”

Lettie’s cheek twitched at his words. It was noon, but the sky was turning dark as black clouds gathered above them. It was clear they weren’t natural. There were occasional flashes of lightning within them, but the lightning was far too dark to be called ‘light.’ The flickering dark lightning was no doubt born from powerful magic.

Not only was it visually ominous, but if someone with an affinity for the lightning attribute like Sajik was warning them about it, it was definitely dangerous. His usual composure was gone, the look on his face one of serious panic.

“This is my first time seeing black lightning. Could it be expert level lightning magic...? Something equal to the highest level of lightning?” Rinne surmised.

Sajik confirmed it. “Yes, that’s the most powerful of the eight vertices, Black Ikazuchi, no doubt about it. I’ve never seen it with my own eyes before either... and more accurately speaking, it’s an ultimate level spell.”

As if to back up his words, everyone was getting goosebumps. The air was becoming electrified even this far away.

“Well, that’s bad. Let’s get to the deposit immediately!” Lettie told them.

With a thunderclap urging them on, the party rushed to their destination at full speed. The top of the deposit looked low to the ground from a distance, but as they got closer, they saw the incline to the top was abnormally steep. It would be extremely challenging to reach for a normal person.

However, the Magicmasters here were elites, and they climbed the rocky mountain by jumping up from small footholds jutting out from the surface. The area at the top of the deposit was small, but if they grouped together there would be enough space for all of them.

Next, the squad put up several layers of barriers without even waiting for directions from Lettie. These were meant to deal with the aftermath of the spell they’d seen before. Together they created a massive barrier that covered the entirety of the top of the deposit. The preparations against the dark clouds weren’t perfect, but they’d at least created a solid defense.

Rinne quietly watched on as the squad got to work. She specialized in detection, so she would only get in the way. “Will you not put up a barrier

too, Lady Lettie?" she suddenly said, having noticed the absence of Lettie's barrier. If they wanted it to be perfect, they couldn't leave out a Single's barrier.

"I'm no good when it comes to that kind of thing."

"Excuse me?"

Lettie laughed a little, and her shoulders slumped. She pushed her braid back from her face and shrugged. "Just so you know, don't put me on the same level as Allie just because we're both Singles. Not everyone's almighty when it comes to magic."

"Ah! I-I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm not petty enough to get jealous over that."

Rinne finally realized it. It was said that a spotter could spend half a lifetime polishing their skills in the Outer World, and in exchange, they had practically no opportunity to pick up attack spells.

The same was true in the opposite sense for Magicmasters who specialized in combat. Major decisions were required when mastering magic. They had to take things into account like affinity, amount of mana, attributes they could use, disposition, proficiency in magic, and so on.

Normally one would have to choose a single path out of a near infinite number, and train. The paths one could take were so numerous that even a lifetime wasn't enough to go down all of them.

Rinne might be the ranked No. 2 spotter, but when it came to her ranking as a normal Magicmaster, she was in the quadruple digits. Mastering something meant giving up something else. Life was nothing but a series of choices. And Rinne had forgotten something that was that obvious. Perhaps it was only natural since she'd been alongside the only Magicmaster that could make the impossible possible in this mission.

That's why Lettie had put her focus on explosive magic, reaching the heights of a Single by mastering that. Meanwhile, it wouldn't be strange for her to be inferior to even a Double in other areas, even though reaching the rank of a Single through a single field of endeavor spoke volumes of her talent.

That's why they were a team—a unit. Lettie was far from all-powerful, and the other members of the squad supported her with their own specialties. Thinking about it, it was common sense and a universal and effective tactic.

Rinne was embarrassed that this truth had slipped from her mind. The next moment, she realized why Alus always chose to fight alone. "In other words, he can do everything on his own... that's why he doesn't need a squad..."

Lettie clearly overheard Rinne's muttering. "I think that's part of it, but..." As she stopped to think, a tremendous light welled up from within the dark clouds.

"That's Black Ikazuchi!" Rinne forgot what Lettie was saying, losing her words over the sight before her. It was like a black dragon, faster than the eye could see, running through the sky towards the ground.

Some moments later, the sound of this display reached their ears. Countless black sparks surged up from the point of the lightning strike. Some even reached all the way up to the top of the deposit, disappearing after crashing into the barriers.

Following that was silence. It was as though the loud sounds of combat had been erased by the lightning strike, leaving only an ominous calm.

"... Anyways, as I was saying, I think it's because if you're alone, nobody will die along with you. Allie had us retreat when he saw that we weren't in the perfect condition to fight, right?"

"... Aren't you just overthinking it?"

"Not at all. He's still only sixteen, you know. Not wanting anyone to die in the Outer World is just a child's ideal... but he's got the power to make it a reality."

Rinne felt like Lettie's image of Alus clashed with her own, and couldn't help but speak out. "Sir Alus doesn't sound like that kind of person to me..."

"Look at you talking! He's an unflinching killing machine, isn't he?"

"—!! I-I wouldn't go that far..."

"Heh, it was just a joke. Well, it's not that far off... everyone who knew Allie when he was in the military probably had that impression. But I've known him since he was younger."

Lettie smiled at Rinne with a slight sense of superiority. "The look on his face has changed though, quite a lot, since he enrolled at the Institute. Well, Allie was doing fine fighting on his own. No Fiend was a match against his overwhelming strength... but that's why I'm worried now. There's still limits to what one person can do. By the way, this is just my pet theory."

"But he has Ms. Loki at his side now."

"Right. She seems a little special, so maybe she'll make a difference, who knows. Anyways, if Allie keeps taking missions on his own, he will slip up at some point. I'm sure of it."

Alus' guardian and superior, Governor-General Berwick, had the same doubts as Lettie did. *That's why he's elsewhere now, isn't it?* Lettie nodded to herself, having understood Berwick's intention in sending Alus there. It was a means to recover what he was missing through everyday life at the Institute.

"Well, that kind of power isolates people. It makes people believe their ideals are a reality. In a sense, his reason for fighting is just a dream. Not trusting your back to someone else on the battlefield, thinking you alone can keep anyone from dying... that's ultimately just for the sake of self-satisfaction. I only hope it's not too late by the time he realizes that."

Lettie had fought on the frontlines and seen subordinates and friends lose their lives countless times.

Rinne understood that her words came from experience. You never knew when the unexpected would happen in the Outer World. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that only irregular events were the norm here, and without fail, situations arose where one person alone couldn't handle it. No matter how overwhelming Alus' strength was, there was no way a person wouldn't make a mistake from birth to death.

"Then why not tell him as much yourself, Lady Lettie?"

"That's no good. You still have a ways to go, huh? That kind of thing has to be realized on one's own."

"That's just cruel..."

"I'd prefer it if you called it love."

"... Love," Rinne said, with a confused look, having reflected on the word.

"This is something he has to do alone... besides, he's managed so far," Lettie said with a forced, lonely smile. "Like I said, he's changed after being at the Institute. It looks like Ms. Sisty is doing something interesting, so I'm expecting much from lil Loki and the others."

Rinne looked at Lettie and wondered if she'd hoped she would be the one to fulfill that role. But seeing the gloom hanging over Lettie's expression, she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"But you can't tell him about this! Allie can be really ignorant about that kind of thing. He'll say he doesn't need help, and put up walls by showing his strength, drawing a line he won't let anyone cross... probably."

Rinne wore a mischievous expression, hearing this. "There's no need to worry. I'm not that insensitive of a woman."

# Fortieth Chapter

## Rebellious Unwanted — Demi Azur

Unfortunately—not even Alus could turn everything around him into a desert.

But even so, Helheim covered a vast area. The trees had turned to gravel, forming several sand dunes where the larger ones had once stood.

The green Outer World had completely changed, as if in a dream. The desert glowed gold as sunlight poured down on it. And now, suddenly, there were dark clouds gathering above. A darkness covered the once dazzling sand, gradually spreading out. It was a sign of the coming storm.

Strangely, it was a phenomenon that only happened above the sand. Some distance away, the sun was shining down as always.

In his battle against the abnormal being, Alus was getting some degree of satisfaction. He'd never met an enemy as powerful as this one, and it was the first time he'd used this much mana.

He wore a thin smile on his lips. It was the elation of the strong in mortal combat.

Looking at him now, it was hard to remember how he'd griped about getting wrapped up in this trouble to begin with.

No—he wondered if it was still troublesome. Before he had gotten excited about this, it had been nothing short of carnage, the unpalatable slaughtering of the weak before him.

The refreshing experience of this situation cleared up Alus' thinking more than anything else had. It was liberating, even. The truth was that this battle made for a fine experiment for him. He was able to use the multitude of spells engraved on his chain for whenever logical or necessary to his heart's content.

So far, most of these spells would've killed most Fiends immediately, so the fight would be over the moment they were used. But in this battle, he could use them freely against this powerful foe.

Yet in spite of his composure, if a third party were to witness this battle, they would determine that Alus was at a slight disadvantage. While he had no fatal wounds, he had cuts here and there on his body and his clothes were torn and scorched.

His blood ran down his cheeks, and he used his sleeve to wipe it off. But since he'd forcibly wiped the surface of the wound, one of his cheeks was left painted red with blood. In return, the flow temporarily stopped, but he wouldn't care if it started up again.

As for the Devourer... It wouldn't be strange for it to be long dead considering the overall damage it had taken from Alus' spells and attacks. But no matter if he cut this terrifying enemy's arm off, or slashed deep into its head, the wounds would heal in an instant. And so the Fiend looked just the same on the surface as when the fight had begun. However, the magical

back and forth would have considerably drained it of its mana, or should have, at least.

Having devoured hundreds of Magicmasters and absorbed their mana, even Alus and his vast stores fell short. *Still, just how much did this thing eat...?* He was well aware that he had an unprecedented amount of mana, on top of his flawless mana control and full control of all attributes. But even so, he wasn't a match for hundreds of Magicmasters. He'd more or less understood that, but it was still disappointing.

And then, to change gears, he exhaled and stared directly at the Fiend. An awkward moment passed while they regarded each other.

Was it sensing danger on an instinctive level, or was it hesitating to attack out of fear? The Fiend wasn't attacking, but Alus couldn't imagine anything good coming from a drawn-out battle.

With a fearless smile, Alus called out to the Fiend as if taunting it. "What do you want to do? With this desert as your footing, you won't be able to put those legs of yours to full use."

Whether the Fiend understood him or not, it opened its mouth and began gnashing its sharp teeth together.

*Regardless, if I want to kill it, I'll have to annihilate it in a single shot.* Not only were its feet sinking into the sand, there were no trees it could leap into. But even then, it was too swift to hit directly with the Black Ikazuchi expanding overhead.

In the next moment, the Fiend made its move. Kicking up sand, it ran towards Alus in an irregular zigzag pattern. It started off on all fours, but then raised its upper body in the blink of an eye, bringing up the arm that had been scraping along the sand.

Three razor-sharp claws rose up from the sand and slashed at him.

Each slash was as sharp as the last attack from Kurama's Hazan, but the mana in them was easily twice that. The most troublesome part was that the force was in the wind attribute itself, meaning that even if they were blocked, it wouldn't be enough to fully kill off the momentum. That said, allowing them to cut through the black clouds would disrupt the spell.

*Fighting wind with wind is the usual practice. I guess I'll crush it.* Alus pulled on the AWR's chain and poured mana into a ring close to the handle as he thrust his hand out.

"<<Downburst>>"

A sudden burst of wind, like a massive invisible foot, came storming down. The air and claw slashes were crushed into a deep, round depression in the sand. The blast of wind that slammed into the ground dissipated along the surface, blowing up the sand and pebbles.

Even in the sandstorm—Alus kept his attention on the Fiend.

He saw two flashes of light flying at his head. In the face of the swiftly approaching attack, Alus bent his upper body backwards to dodge. With his eyes facing skyward, he could see the heat rays flash by.



Turning back to stare at the Fiend, he immediately identified the two rays as having been fired out of the abnormal ends of the Devourer's forked tail. When it moved its tail, the still firing rays were carelessly swung around.

Alus kicked up with his leg, and the sand at his feet was thrown up. Pouring mana through the sand, he created a sand wall to block the heat rays' assault.

In the moment of time it bought him, he twisted his body to dodge. A portion of the sand wall swelled up, and the white beams pierced through, just barely grazing Alus' cheek.

He then put up several layers of barrier in the way of the rushing Fiend, but the Fiend used its hands and claws to try to pry them open by force.

Eventually it seemed to get sick of working at it, and mana focused in its mouth. It came to a complete stop, closing its mouth as if taking a deep breath, with its chest swelling up.

"—Trying to take full advantage of your mana, are you?!" Alus muttered in annoyance, as the Devourer's mouth opened up at almost 180 degrees, firing out a ball of highly condensed mana.

That ball easily crushed through all layers of his barrier with ease. It was a pitch black ball of gravity, though it didn't move as fast as the heat rays. If swallowed by that, not only would one be physically damaged, one's mana would be damaged as well. In fact, it was hard to imagine what would happen to a human's soft body.

In reaction, Alus created a globe of his own, but it was a manifested spell rather than pure mana. When contrasted against the Devourer's black ball, it looked like a small white sun.

"<<Astral Sun>>"

No, it didn't just look like one. It was fundamentally a compressed, small sun.

The whirling Astral Sun created a spiral emerging from its surface, and crossed paths with the ball of gravity that contained a deep darkness within.

In order to brace himself for the coming shockwave and heatwave, Alus raised a sand wall ahead of him. The wall looked like a wave of sand had risen up and suddenly been frozen.

The moment the wall was finished, a fierce shockwave came over Alus. Then the hot blast from the two colliding spheres washed over the entire area. A normal human wouldn't have stood a chance. The heatwave would've wiped them out in an instant.

Once the two waves receded, Alus made to stand up, when he saw a hole burst open in the scorched sand wall. Two tails with creepy mouth-like openings came through towards him.

"—!" He slashed Night Mist to cut one of them off, but wasn't fast enough to deal with the other. Its fangs dug into his left shoulder and twisted, gouging out the flesh.

He finally cut it down on the return swing of the black blade, and the bloodstained tail made a heavy thud as it hit the ground, a piece of flesh falling out of its mouth.

When Alus glanced at the wound, he saw it was pulsing out blood. He opened and closed his hand to see how bad it was, and fortunately his fingers still moved, but he couldn't raise his arm.

"... I guess I'll have to teach you a lesson before finishing this!" As if hungry for revenge, Alus glared at the Devourer, then he focused. The next moment a wind was whipped up, and a wriggling mana flooded out of his body. It was like darkness had been given physical form, a mana that could be seen with the naked eye.

Sensing the dreadful presence, the Devourer's regenerated tail was pulled back to its body as if it was trying to escape.

"Where do you think you're going..." Alus slowly raised his right hand, and the darkness squirmed.

"Feast, Gluttonous Predator <<*Gra Eater*>>"

At Alus' voice, the dark mana seemingly took on a will of its own and dove towards its target. The pointed tip of it curled up in midflight... and its black mouth opened. It skipped across the sand like a stone skipping across water.

Each time it scraped along the ground, it accelerated. Finally, the black mana reached the Devourer. Vast amounts of mana spewed out from Gra Eater's mouth.

The mana took on the shape of smaller serpents that greedily opened their mouths as well, like an endless appetite given form, multiplying and expanding. It also looked like countless black tentacles had sprouted out of Alus' body.

Before long, the Devourer was surrounded by the greedy predator that had split into a hundred parts.

Gra Eater mercilessly tried to bite into the Fiend, but the Fiend moved out of the way, causing Gra Eater to miss and collide with itself. But only for an instant, as it quickly returned to its original rampaging form and relentlessly chased after its target.

The Devourer attempted to fight back by unleashing a slash with its claws, but they simply passed through Gra Eater's body of mana. Moreover, as the attack had contained wind magic, a large amount of mana poured into Alus.

As Gra Eater was mana, magic was theoretically the only means of counteracting it, but in reality it weakened the enemy's power and absorbed it with its endless appetite. In other words, neither physical attacks nor magic worked, meaning it had practically no weaknesses.

The Devourer still hadn't given up, as it bit into Gra Eater with its tails, but only ended up having its mana robbed from it instead. Gra Eater could take in mana from the entire surface of its body, so it didn't matter where it was attacked.

*Should be about enough...* The mana absorbed from the Devourer was more than expected. So Alus decided to call it back before he lost control of it and it ran rampant.

The mana Gra Eater ate was nourishment for it, but Alus could also use it for spells. Having absorbed such a huge amount, the predator had grown plump. He focused on pulling back Gra Eater, crushing its resistance.

Gradually, the wriggling black mana faded away. Confirming that it had fully returned inside of him, he coldly stared at the Fiend that still persistently attacked Gra Eater's afterimage. "I can't tell if this thing is intelligent or not... no, if it was, it would've run away when I used Helheim." Alus shrugged in exasperation.

"OOOOOOOOoooo!!" It seemed the Devourer finally realized its mana had been eaten, as it let out a roar that made the sky tremble. The Fiend leaned forward, putting its arms on the ground, and made a beeline straight for Alus at an explosive speed.

Mana was pouring out of its mouth and from the ends of its tail. When the Devourer stomped its feet into the ground, it unleashed it all at once. Just as the Roscarg had, the Devourer froze the desert over.

"Niflheim. In the end a monster's just a monster," Alus muttered, as he snapped his fingers upward. When he did, the Fiend's jaw rose up as if it was being pulled.

Space domination magic would be exaggerating it a little, as all Alus had done was form a sturdy rectangular shape from below the oncoming Fiend's jaw and pushed it up. If it hadn't been enraged, it would have dodged the attack easily.

Alus remained calm, carefully observing the Devourer, and he didn't miss the opening. He quickly put out and crossed his hands.

Sharp sand spears burst forth from the frozen ground. Four of them, rapidly rotating, attacked the Devourer from all sides, piercing its upper body. Due to its composition, Helheim was resistant to interference. It created a world that couldn't be overwritten by magic. No further change could be made to a dead world waiting for the end.

The Devourer had already shown Niflheim to Alus when it had been lurking inside of the Roscarg. It was impossible to break the source of the sand world without understanding the mechanism behind it. And that wasn't something a Fiend could aim to do. It hadn't even noticed the main component of Helheim that had been hidden underground.

"GYAAAAaaa!!" Its scream once more made the air tremble, the volume loud enough to burst eardrums.

The sand spears crumbled and changed form into lumps of rock floating in the air. With rocks surrounding its body, the Fiend's arms were pinned behind its back.

The Fiend brought up its tail to break through its bonds, but the rocks only returned to sand for an instant before hardening once more.

While its resistance appeared pointless, Alus couldn't let his guard down. It was still likely that the Fiend had enough power to break free from a binding of this level. "But it's too late now..."

The sand below the Devourer parted, opening up a hole that seemed to lead straight to hell. The floating rocks binding the Fiend returned to sand, and collapsed.

And once freed—the Fiend succumbed to gravity and fell.

"It's just you and me here. You won't be able to use Shuffle." Alus stared down the hole as it fell. The wind blew up, rustling his hair, as he swung his AWR and brought its chain in front of him. Holding his hand over one of its rings, he created a spell through his AWR that took the form of thin black lightning flashing around him.

*Now that I think about it, the first to find a new type of Fiend gets the right to name it.*

Animals were one thing, but only the truly eccentric would want to name a bizarre Fiend. As such, it was common for military and government research institutes to name new types.

But in that moment, something naturally came to Alus' mind. This thing ate even other Fiends, and was all alone. It ate not only people but its own kind... it was an existence that was detested by all, a poster child of darkness that quietly lurked within host bodies.

"I think 'Rebellious Unwanted, Demi Azur' would suit you just fine."

The Fiend was in free fall, plummeting deep into the dark hole. It could probably see the core of Helheim in its depths, but it was already too late. Before the Devourer was out of sight, Alus could see it reaching out with its arms and tail to stop its fall, but everything around it was sand, so it was all in vain.

As he watched it disappear, Alus mercilessly uttered the words that would seal its fate.

*"<<Black Ikazuchi>>"*

Black lightning descended down the massive hole like a black dragon.





The attack moved so fast it left sound itself behind. Once in the hole, the lightning split into what looked like black snakes. And a beat later, the atmosphere trembled, and the sand was blown up.

Black Ikazuchi completely filled up the hole, blowing away anything and everything, before disappearing.

For a second blackness covered everything. It was complete darkness, like one's eyes were closed. However, color and light and form started to return from the point of impact.

Alus had fixed his body to the spot with mana, and put up several layers of barriers to protect himself, which he finally released. He checked out how things looked after the release of Black Ikazuchi, and after floating for a moment, he slowly descended.

The ground had disappeared. Everything in front of him had been deeply gouged out, exposing the earth below. Helheim had been undone.

Unlike Niflheim, another environment-changing spell, Helheim could change the terrain while also assisting the Magicmaster. While Niflheim deceived the world through the principle of magic, Helheim rewrote and replaced the substance itself. In other words, it turned the false world into reality.

It was a change purely on the material level, but much of the changed material remained in the real world permanently, even if the caster stopped supplying it with mana.

The massive hole wasn't just from the impact of Black Ikazuchi, but also from converting the dirt into sand through Helheim, which then crumbled away. The sand that still lined the hole was a sign of how powerful the spell Alus had used was.

At some point, the dark clouds had completely disappeared as if they were never there, revealing a cloud-free sky above. And with nothing to obstruct it, the sunlight shone down and lit up the massive scars of magic.

Alus had likely used up a third of the mana he'd absorbed and restored. The spell used too much mana, but he'd still created a spell this powerful despite lacking an affinity for the lightning attribute. It was nothing short of a feat of strength, but just being able to use the vertex of lightning was a luxury...

"The spell's definitely worthy enough of being called an ultimate level one..." There were currently only four ranks used to classify spells, but that wasn't enough to accurately classify all spells. To begin with, this evaluation standard had been in effect for fifty years. As humanity had expanded its knowledge and made great strides in the field, some spells that couldn't be measured by conventional standards had been created.

There was already a fifth ultimate level added to the rankings, with spells categorized as such, including Black Ikazuchi.

But normally that wasn't a realm within human reach. Alus surveyed his surroundings with a bitter smile. It looked like a crater after a meteor

impact. As a result of the gouged-out ground, he could see exposed bedrock in the hole. The whole area below was probably part of the deposit. Because he'd guessed correctly about what was going on underground, Alus' expression eased up.

When he suddenly felt—

“—!!” He reflexively braced himself, but then let out a small sigh, shrugging. “Looks like it died after all, but to think there's something left of it... that's the kind of toughness you'd expect from an SS-class.”

In the center of Black Ikazuchi's impact was the deformed body of the Fiend. Its once black body had now completely carbonized. One of its arms was blown off from its elbow, and its horn that stretched backwards gradually crumbled away.

Leaving the corpse alone, Alus turned around. Rubbing his now stiff shoulders, he walked towards the edge of the crater... when the sound of something bubbling came from behind him.

He whipped his head around to look.

Taking place in front of him was an abnormal sight. The supposedly dead Fiend's body was swelling up like a balloon. Without anywhere to go, the mana was leaking out like gas.

The Fiend was definitely dead. So it would eventually disperse alongside the mana... or at least it was supposed to.

*Shit...!*

All Fiends, without exception, had a core. He was already well aware of the Devourer's extreme regeneration. That's why he'd used Black Ikazuchi to destroy everything, along with its core. And he should have succeeded.

But now... it appeared that the Devourer wasn't storing its absorbed mana in its core, but in some other organ.

It was also said that the core was responsible for converting absorbed mana into something more suitable for a Fiend, which was why it was said to be a Fiend's weak point. But apparently this Devourer's body wasn't that easy to understand.

Alus' instincts told him that this Fiend stored all of the mana it absorbed throughout its entire body. Which meant that every single cell in its body was a storehouse for mana, instead of just its core.

It would normally be impossible and basically unbelievable—but this Devourer exceeded all imagination.

At any rate, it was already too late. With the Fiend dead, its cells began swelling with mana and started rampaging like an unchained beast. There were many different kinds of mana mixing and conflicting with each other... and it was probably Demi Azur's core that had maintained the balance between them.

Without something to rein the mana in, it would eventually run completely rampant, and give birth to a certain phenomenon.

“A super anti-magic explosion, huh...” Alus muttered to himself.



It was something impossible that could become possible under the right circumstances. When compressing contradicting manas and sealing them in a small vessel, some form of trigger could bring about an explosion. The Devourer's cells were still in the process of conflicting with each other, which created the worst possible conditions.

Just the blastwave from the explosion would stretch dozens of kilometers. Of the many phenomena that could be created with mana, it was the one that would cause the most damage.

If it happened, even Lettie's squad, as far away as they were, would be wiped out in an instant.

He should at least put up a last stand for their sake. But even then, the possibilities were just... It was a good thing that he'd kept a degree of distance from Tesfia and Alice.

A number of doubts whirled through Alus' head. If only he'd... and so on. However, any of the countermeasures he could think of meant nothing before the reality he faced.

There hadn't been a single report of an SS-class Fiend since the event fifty years ago. And strictly speaking, the elimination of the Fiend back then had failed, and the full story of its nature and weaknesses had never been discovered. Not to mention the Fiend's type and circumstances, how many Magicmasters it had devoured and the quality of their mana—all remained unknown.

As expected, it had needed to be eliminated in one fell swoop. Perhaps they should all have pooled their spells together. No, Black Ikazuchi was one step short of finishing it off, so he could have just poured all of his mana into it.

All kinds of ideas came to mind, but they were all measures for 'next time.' None of them would change the present.

Even now, the Fiend's body was growing larger at a frightening pace, and Demi Azur had already lost its original form. It was swelling to its limits, and its massive body would soon be huge enough to cover the sky and dim the surroundings.

With resignation, Alus returned his AWR to its sheath with a sigh. *What a blunder...*

He looked up, his gaze following the clouds floating in the Outer World's sky.

The sky today was as blue as always. And as usual, it was constantly changing. He'd only seen cloud shapes like these out here. With the sunlight lighting the clouds up from behind, their outlines glowed like halos.

If he had his water bottle with him, he'd pour the water out on his head. That was his habit whenever he was in this state of mind, and even though he knew he hadn't brought it with him, he still reached for his waist.

"Now then..." he muttered, having made up his mind. There was no way to contact Lettie and the others. Even if he could make the call, it was too late.

Alus gazed at the Devourer's body that was still expanding even now, looking like it could explode any moment. Once that happened, this entire area would turn into a barren wasteland. Not even Balmes, which was quite some distance away, would come out in one piece. It would without a doubt envelop the top of the deposit where Lettie and the others were as well.

Alus slowly closed his eyes. *I feel bad for Lettie and the squad.* He even apologized silently, completely out of character for him. He'd been the one to tell them what to do, and this is what they got.

*I guess I won't be getting the reward, either... Well, this life wasn't too bad, he thought to himself with a self-deprecating smile.*

Alus did have a choice to make, but either way, his life was already... He knew that.

It appeared it would still be some time before his life flashed before his eyes like he'd read about in some book. Though it wouldn't be until the very end that he'd find out if he had any memories that left enough of an impression to appear in his mind. He did have a passing interest in what he would see, though.

*Regardless, he let out a sharp breath. I guess my end is in the Outer World after all... huh.*

By now he even welcomed it. He loved the scenery in the Outer World. He felt a majestic providence... it was nature untouched by humanity's hands.

Alus had already assumed he wouldn't die a pretty death, so he felt this was probably one of the better ways to go.

Atrocious criminals or not, he'd ended the lives of several people. The Magicmasters he'd once entered the Outer World with had changed on an almost daily basis, and eventually the number of people who knew him, and the people he wanted to know more about, Lettie's group excluded, amounted to a handful. He'd also put more allies out of their misery than he could count on his fingers.

In fact, countless people had lost their lives before he'd become a Single. And now he would just join their ranks.

However, even then... He was choosing at least to save Lettie and the others. Staking his own life to save the lives of others... whether he could actually save them or not was uncertain. He might just be putting up a useless resistance against a merciless fate.

He was aware that he was getting sentimental, his heart pounding. "Huh, was I really like this...?" he unconsciously spat out, before raising his head as if realizing something.

But he shook his head as if to reject it. Even if the chance for the best outcome was less than one percent, he wouldn't hesitate to choose it. That was the way he was.

But... against an enemy of this caliber, there was just no opportunity for that. So this was just a chance to test his own character and soul. That was why—

"Now then, I am the ranked No. 1, so I should at least put up some useless resistance!" The AWR at his waist made a thud as it fell to the ground. It was just a pointless weight now. "I'll unleash your shackles, so devour everything to the limits of your desire! <<*Gra Eater*>>"

Alus resolved himself and thrust out his hand. Mana, like a manifestation of chaos, poured out, and in the blink of an eye darkness engulfed the area. He'd unleashed the full potential of Gra Eater with no consideration for the consequences.

A tidal wave of black rushed at the Fiend like it had discovered a feast. Before long, the torrent-like Gra Eater opened its mouth and bit into the Fiend.

He had made the decision to drain the Fiend of mana before an explosion could occur. But that came with a risk to his life. As expected, the mana Gra Eater ate and absorbed filled up the capacity of Alus' vessel to its limit in an instant.

*Thump.* He felt something bouncing. It definitely wasn't the sound of his heart. It was the sound of something inside reaching its limit and breaking. Ignoring the abnormal event in his body, he focused solely on manipulating Gra Eater to have it feed on the Fiend's mana.

Gra Eater explosively grew in size due to the amount of mana it absorbed. Fortunately, even after Alus unleashed its full strength and weakened his control of it, it continued to linger around the Fiend's body. It was moving purely on the instincts of a predator, refusing to let go of a delicious feast.

*It's not enough... it's not going to make it at this absorption rate!* Even with Gra Eater eating at it, the Fiend still had an abundance of mana. No matter how much it ate, the signs of the coming explosion weren't receding. Alus clicked his tongue, and further loosened the reins on Gra Eater. Having gone this far, he couldn't turn back. If the grown Gra Eater were to run rampant, he wouldn't be able to regain control.

Gra Eater continued eating with increasing speed.

Alus grimaced as mana gathered inside of him at an extreme rate. His extended right arm started trembling. It slowly started to bounce around in all directions, and suddenly blood began spewing from his arm. A blood vessel must have ruptured. The mana in his blood had grown so dense his blood vessels and skin were unable to withstand it any further.

He bit down and endured the pain. At the same time, an abnormality occurred to his left arm. He'd left it dangling, but blood was running down from his shoulder, and he gradually stopped feeling the pain and numbness. The nerves were starting to shut down. After a short pause, the blood vessels in both legs swelled into bumps and burst open.

Alus fell to his knees, but still kept his right arm thrust out, staring at Gra Eater and the Fiend. He'd known from the start that even if he prevented the explosion, he'd definitely lose control of Gra Eater...

He could feel the signs of the magical explosion within the Fiend weakening, little by little. And it appeared that Gra Eater had finally devoured all of its mana, as it moved away from its remains. Only pieces of its outer shell and dregs of mana were left. Cracks ran through the shell, before it crumbled like sand.

*Did it... the next will be...*

Having finished the food in front of it, Alus anticipated that Gra Eater would start to rampage. But contrary to his expectations, it began to coil around itself above him. But this could also be just a short nap after dinner, and it was likely that its instinctual greed would send it out in search of new prey.

Alus' entire surroundings were covered by the massive Gra Eater. It blocked out the sun, making it look like night to him. Because its body was somewhat transparent, it cast a dark, eerie, and wavering shadow on the ground.

"To think it was this big..." Looking up at the sky, he could see Gra Eater casting a shadow that covered the entire crater. It had sent so much mana into Alus, but just how much more had it absorbed and used as nutrients for itself to grow?

It looked like a massive, black sphere. Bobbing up and down in the air, overflowing the area with mana, it was like a strange aquarium in the sky.

Driven by an insatiable appetite, there was no telling when it would hunt for new prey.

It was likely that it could detect Lettie and the others' mana already.

Maybe it would even bare its fangs at Balmes itself.

... Though it probably wouldn't go that far. Gra Eater might have a sense of self, but it was still an indivisible part of Alus, so if it got too far away from him, the information should degrade and it should be reduced to mana particles.

However—there was no guarantee of that. Which was why this was such a gamble.

With this much mana, it was possible that Gra Eater could make up for the deteriorating mana by itself, becoming independent from Alus, and making it capable of going wherever it pleased. To put it bluntly, it would be the birth of a complete magical life form.

If something like that was unleashed on the planet... he would have created something worse than the Devourer. He wanted to think it wouldn't happen, but that might be too optimistic. The sense of unease sent a chill down his spine, despite his lack of sensation.

*But even if that happens, I have a card I can play.* That was to take his own life before Gra Eater became a complete life form. That way, this special ability would completely disappear.

Killing yourself. Stopping your own life with your own hands.

He'd done the same to others time and time again...

Suddenly an old memory came to mind. It hadn't been on purpose, just a spur of the moment kind of thing. Just when had it been...? When he'd said that he didn't need anyone else...

Was it after he'd seen hundreds of Magicmasters die... or when someone had begged him to kill them rather than let the Fiends get them...

The screams and shouts of those who had been left to die reverberated in his head. And he could still see Magicmasters with tears in their eyes full of regret and crushed hopes.

The answer to when it happened was probably when he'd killed his feelings to escape from the endless hell of having to see allies die, and sometimes having to kill them with his own hands.

*Maybe I didn't want to kill anyone...* he wondered to himself. It wasn't a bad feeling. But then a smile of self-derision appeared on his face, as even in the end the squad he'd brought with him were at risk of losing their lives.

The next moment, a chill overcame him. Gra Eater's massive body lurking above him had dispersed in a flash.

"Tsk!!" Several smaller creatures burst forth, like water from a ruptured dam. All of them were made up of just a mouth, the perfect image of a predator, all baring their ferocious fangs.

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Even from the top of the deposit, it was easy to see. It was clearly different from the dark clouds of Black Ikazuchi, but it was still similar in appearance.

"What's that thing...?" Lettie muttered, staring at the pool of black mana.

There was no answer to her question, but she decided to call out to the person who'd shown a reaction. "Ms. Rinne, you know, dontcha... what happened to the Fiend? What is that thing?"

"T-The Fiend... the Devourer has been killed by Sir Alus."

Relief washed over the squad members. But Lettie stared at Rinne, urging her to continue and answer her questions in full.

"And that thing is... Sir Alus... I guess you could call it a spell..." She'd been told to keep quiet, but looking at this ominous mana, she couldn't keep it a secret anymore.

Rinne had already ascertained that this was an abnormal situation with her magic eye. That dangerous thing was probably something that Alus had brought forth, but was now out of his control. She'd clearly seen as much.

But leaving that aside for now, she continued her explanation. "Remember that absorption ability Sir Alus showed against Kurama? Its true form is no doubt that bizarre mana over there."

"So it's all solved then?"

"No. We should get away from here as soon as possible... there's probably nothing anyone can do about that thing... not even Sir Alus." Rinne looked down in resignation, her words tapering off.

Lettie questioned her. "Why? That's Allie's magic, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes. But it's different from normal magic... I think. That pool of mana doesn't have a spell construction to begin with. And it's like it's moving with a will of its own," Rinne muttered, having given up on the idea of covering it up any longer.

"..."

Rinne's words blew away the relief that the squad members had felt, replacing it with a stiff tension. "I believe Sir Alus was trying to control that mana. And from what I gather it absorbed all of the mana from the Fiend's body that was about to explode... or he tried..." Going on was hard for her, so she closed her eyes and bit her lip before finally continuing, "Sir Alus is already on the verge of death. The bleeding is awful..."

"Then we need to hurry and save him!" Sajik exclaimed.

But Rinne stopped him with her eyes, before frankly speaking in a cold tone, "That black mass of mana is comprised of a frightening amount of mana in spite of the state Sir Alus is in... even though it's meant to be a part of him."

The sound of someone gulping was strangely loud.

She went on, "I believe that is the kind of existence that it is. If we go there now, we probably won't even have a chance to fight back. This isn't on the level of attacking or defending." The memory of that special ability absorbing Hazan's attack was burned into her mind. Her intuition as a spotter told her that it wasn't a spell.

The existence was on the level of a calamity. Humans had no way of fighting back against it. It was like having an unknown monster inhabiting his body. That's why her instincts were telling her to get away as soon as possible.

"Let's retreat as soon as possible. But even then we might not make it in time..." Her words made it clear that the situation was hopeless.

However—"Then it's decided. We're going to save Allie."

"Right!"

"No objections."

"I'm confident in my speed."

Lettie's statement was followed up by Mujir, Sajik and the other squad members.

Rinne was shocked. "It's impossible! There's no way to make it over there in time. Not to mention that we have a duty to report this situation right away!"

"Hmm, that's true. Then I'll give that duty to you," Lettie said with a broad smile. "You're not part of our squad, after all. You have no obligation to tag along."

"T-That's not the problem here..." Rinne raised her voice, when she was interrupted.

Mujir said, "That is the problem, Lady Rinne. We are soldiers. Members of Captain Lettie's squad. We have our pride to protect, and a line that can't

be crossed. It's not the way of life you'd understand, right? But that's how we are. If I abandoned Sir Alus here, I wouldn't be able to face my wife."

"If you have a wife, then that's all the more reason to..."

"I'm not going there to die. But I believe I understand what has to be prioritized. My wife vowed to stay with me till death do us part because I am like this. And considering the coming generations... that's all the more reason!"

Mujir scratched his cheek in embarrassment, while Sajik glared at him with some envy mixed in, before saying, "Well, this guy's in the minority, but even a bachelor like me wouldn't want to return in shame. The battlefields I've been on taught me never to abandon my commander."

"That's how it is," Lettie said. "But there's an easier to understand reason..."

"What?" Rinne asked with a mystified expression.

Lettie's eyes narrowed. She wasn't speaking from personal feelings, but stern facts. "Allie is our last hope. I don't know about the other Singles, but Allie is irreplaceable. To Alpha, and to humanity. The Governor-General understands that too. And we all feel the same way... then there's me personally not wanting to abandon him."

"Is that love then?"

"Who knows? So, Ms. Rinne, survive this and report to the Governor-General." Lettie's smile grew wider as Rinne silently stared at her.

The squad members showed no regrets over their decision. They had no hesitation about what to do. In fact, it was clear to them. Rinne had been in the military, but primarily in logistical support, and her time in the military had been short. As someone who specialized in information gathering, she'd been taught to survive and bring back what she'd learned above all. So she struggled to understand that pride.

Yet she was somewhat envious of the squad members' vivid expressions. She had no complaints about her current position as the ruler's aide. If anything, it felt like her calling. At the same time, she felt like their lifestyles as Magicmasters were worthy of her respect. And if Cicelnia was in the same situation, she would have quickly made up her mind.

Rinne sighed, then shrugged, releasing her body from the tension of the unexpected situation. She mustered up her willpower, and forcibly put on her usual meek smile. "I understand. Please let me go with you."

"—! What about the report?!"

"It's fine, isn't it? You're not going there to die after all. Either way, there's no time." This irresponsible comment was delivered with a sarcastic smile. While she said that, she didn't believe in Mujir's words. Perhaps she had something planned.

Taking Rinne's words as a sign of her determination, Lettie smiled fearlessly. "Then do what you want."

"But if we go in without a plan, even the easiest of rescues can fail. I have a general idea of what's happening there."

“That’s unexpected.”

Rinne frowned at Lettie’s words for a moment. She was Alpha’s Eye, so wasn’t that a little rude? But there was no time to spare for that. “I’m not at Sir Alus’ level, but I do have some knowledge about special abilities. It’s really only an idea, and parts of it I don’t understand. It’s a special ability that no one else has heard of, after all.”

Seeing everyone nod, she continued, “I’m sure that thing will continue to move even if Sir Alus loses consciousness. If that happens, there will be nothing we can do, but there should be something we can do as long as he’s still conscious. But try not to touch that thing no matter what... you’ll lose your life immediately. And be careful of its ability to absorb mana. Any reckless spells will only make it bigger and stronger.”

Perhaps because she’d touched on the matter beforehand, but even after hearing that they couldn’t touch or even block it, the squad members didn’t waver.

Rinne had confirmed the black mass of mana’s speed with her magic eye. At that size it was destined to turn a little sluggish, but in the end not even Lettie would be able to escape. That was why she’d advised them to retreat earlier. Not that they would listen to her... “Sir Alus is somewhere in the center of that massive hole, but he’s badly wounded and unable to move. He should still be conscious, but it wouldn’t be strange for him to pass out any moment now.”

“These bad odds are made for us! I like it.” Lettie surveyed her squad with a broad grin.

They nodded to her, and together with Rinne—they all rushed down the peak of the deposit.

The squad descended, not lumping up together, but also making sure to avoid spreading out too far. They didn’t even bother going around the massive trees in their path, instead opting to jump over them, making a literal beeline for the crater.

“That aside, does Allie’s special ability have the same level of strength as your magic eye?” Lettie asked, her eyes pointed straight forward. She was speculating in an attempt to find a solution.

“I wonder. Special abilities are not just limited to magic eyes...” Rinne answered her, but she still had the closest thing to a solution in mind.

*However, it was just a possibility. From what she’d seen with her magic eye, the chances of success were doubtful. Controlling a magic eye ultimately relies on mental strength. Even if that special ability isn’t similar to a magic eye, it should still work the same way. Sir Alus should already know that too... once it’s released, restraining it by will alone is impossible. And based on the current situation, that’s already happened.*

Rinne knew very well that there were special abilities that would resist and struggle against their user whenever there was a chance. Once that thing grew too massive, it would be impossible to regain control of it. And



that black mass of mana looked like it had already far exceeded the limits of Alus' ability to control it.

However, if an outside influence were to appeal to him... well, the chances for success wouldn't be zero at least, as long as Alus was conscious.

At the same time, Rinne suddenly thought, *Maybe this is why Sir Alus took an interest in my eye.* Maybe he'd feared this possibility and looked for clues as to what to do in case something happened. Thinking about it, perhaps not even Alus had a solution for his rampaging special ability.

Then she realized that she'd been swept away by the squad's enthusiasm, and that maybe coming with them wasn't the best idea. Strictly speaking, she did have a plan, but it had never been tested before, so its chances for success were a complete mystery.

She wouldn't have any regrets, but if Cicelnia heard about it, she would no doubt make fun of her. She could easily imagine Cicelnia mocking her for getting so worked up with the others, with a sarcastic smile. At the same time, she was also somewhat looking forward to it, causing her to frown. It was like she enjoyed being bullied by that beautiful and perfect ruler.

When it happened, she would surely be gritting her teeth in mortification as she was being mocked. Maybe she'd even object... and once that happened, she'd surely make excuse after excuse.

Cicelnia would then coldly stare at her incompetent aide and...

Rinne shook her head to free herself from her negative thoughts, and told herself that she had to make it back alive. "That said, it all depends on Sir Alus... if we can make our way there, that is."

"Right. But it's not moving yet. You made it sound like it would make its move right away."

"I just meant that it wouldn't be strange for it to move. I became convinced that Sir Alus is still conscious because it hasn't moved yet... in other words, even though that mass of mana should have left his control already, he's still resisting it and keeping it in place."

"I see," Lettie said. "So we still have a chance then."

Rinne nodded with a smile, as she moved through the air. It was proof of possibility. This could still be resolved so long as Alus was resisting... they had to believe in that. Approaching Alus to save him meant recklessly getting in front of the mass of mana and exposing themselves to danger.

"P-Please wait a minute—" Rinne suddenly shouted out in panic. A magic circle floating above her eye signaled that the Eye of Providence was active. Far ahead of them, closer to Alus, she'd seen something flash by in her magic eye's view. It was very small, but she couldn't overlook it.

And what she'd seen was clearly a person's silhouette.

And if she was remembering correctly... "Someone is heading for the crater ahead of us. It's only one person... but why is she..."

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Immediately after the countless mouths had burst out of Gra Eater, Alus was doing his best to keep the rampage under control.

Maybe putting up any resistance was pointless. Alus had actually polished his mana control, which other Magicmasters tended to dismiss as less important, so that he could control his special ability.

In spite of that, what floated above him was no longer a trump card under his control, and it probably wasn't just a mass of mana either. Its magical connection to Alus was gradually disappearing as it grew and became more of an individual.

Thanks to him putting up a weak resistance with his hazy mind, he'd managed to slow the mana's movement. Even if it was just temporary, he should be able to buy some time.

If Lettie and the others could escape, it would be more than enough.

After that... Alus would bring things to an end himself. That way, Alpha would have successfully eliminated the Fiend and kept the damage from the incident to a minimum.

"Haa, haa, haa... Ack!" Alus kept his fading mind from passing out by biting into his lip. He felt the taste of iron as blood rushed into his mouth.

Any sensation from below his knees was long gone, and he couldn't feel his left arm at all, so it may as well have been gone. Though he could feel a weight pulling his shoulder down in between bouts of pain.

After expelling all of the mouths, Gra Eater moved forth to try and shake free once more.

His vision was darkening, and his body was getting colder. His body temperature was probably dropping due to extreme blood loss. Blood was pooling on the ground, and the blood running down his body was so warm he just wanted to lie down in it.

If he let his guard down for even a moment, Gra Eater would move as it pleased. That said, even if he desperately held on, he'd likely only last another minute.

That was when he felt a presence rapidly closing in. Once the person reached the edge of the crater, the small silhouette jumped in and rushed over.

Alus could tell who it was from her hair color, reflecting the sun's light. And when he did, he glared at her.

There was no way he'd mistake that familiar cloak and dark military skirt. The slim legs were entirely wrapped up in bandages.

Still on his knees, Alus raised his upper body and held up his right hand. "Why did you come?!" With those words and anger... no, rage, he called out to the silver-haired girl.

Once she was right in front of him, Loki finally stopped. She was completely drenched in sweat. The bandages around her legs were red from all the blood that had soaked through. "S-Sir Alus... What is...!! You're hurt! L-Let me treat you..." she said, panicking, and tried to step closer.

But Alus stopped her. "I told you... don't come! You went against my orders!" The Devourer was dead, but the rampaging Gra Eater was still a threat, so Loki needed to get away from here as soon as possible.

But she took a big step towards Alus, as if to say that justice was on her side. Her face twisted in pain, but she showed no signs of stopping, as she came closer. "I didn't go against your orders. Sir Alus' words are absolute. That's why I came... according to the promise that we made. The Second Magical Institute won the tournament. And you promised to bring me along on your missions."

He'd even said he wouldn't go back on his word. The situation was bad, but this took the wind out of his sails completely.

"You never said when, so I decided that the promise was valid from when our victory was declared."

Alus couldn't find any grounds on which to retort right away. But in any case, he didn't have the leeway to think about things logically...

Gra Eater was still coiling above them, when it suddenly seemed to detect Loki's mana as it reacted to her.

An extra large mouth reached down towards the ground... Alus focused his mind to restrain it, after which it stopped and hovered in the background. If he let up for even a moment, Loki's small body would be gulped up by that massive mouth in an instant.

Alus spoke to Loki in a polite and calm tone. "This is my power, but it's already out of my control... like trying to hold back a monster freed from its cage. It will even go after you. So get away from here right now! I'll be able to buy you at least that much time."

"I see..." Loki paused for a moment. Back when she'd fought against Alus to earn her position as his partner, perhaps it was this power that had erased Naruikazuchi. "I understand the situation. But what will happen to you? You *will* survive, won't you...? I believe those injuries are in need of immediate treatment."

Alus said nothing. But he wasn't going to lie. He knew how she'd become his partner after all. Her sincere feelings and pure stubbornness had driven her so far that she'd been willing to give up her life. He hadn't admonished her for that because he knew that once Loki was composed and her feelings settled down, she'd understand it for herself.

He had never asked for that kind of loyalty. In fact, it was a burden. He even wondered why she would go so far for someone like him. "This thing will probably not be able to go beyond a certain distance from me. As long as it doesn't absorb any more mana and grow even more, that is. If the main body stays here, there's a limit to how far the mana can go. After that, well... it will probably eat me."

The end of his life would result in Gra Eater disappearing as well, but Alus was more or less convinced that the rampaging mana could no longer make that kind of distinction. And having grown this much, it was possible

that it could make up for the mana information regulating it with its own power. He explained this to Loki with a calm expression.

“—!!” A chill ran down Loki’s spine. She’d predicted it might be something like that, but predicting it and hearing it as the truth were two different things.

At the same time—an unshakable resolve was born. “Is there nothing I can do?”

“Nothing! Just get as far away from here as you can! I might have saved you once... but that’s not a reason for you to go down with me. There’s no need for you to stay out of gratitude.”

“...!!” Loki’s reaction was from having something that was coiled up inside of her finally be unleashed. “So you remembered...”

Her feelings rushed up... like her soul was trembling. She was so happy, she wanted to embrace him, as she shed tears and thanked him. She was always bad at recognizing her emotions, and even worse at showing them, but in this moment she was able to smile naturally.

“Listen, I didn’t choose you as my partner just to let you die...”

“Yes, I understand.” *That’s the kind of person you are, Sir Alus... but this is my only desire.* Loki kept the rest of the words to herself, as she slowly approached him again.

Alus instinctively glared at her, as if saying not to come closer. “Loki, you are brilliant. And you have talent too... That’s why...”

“Sir Alus, as you know, I am like you. I don’t have any admirable aspirations like protecting humanity or saving the world. My world is the one you live in. Though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel any gratitude...”

Loki found herself shouting, “But in reality, in reality that doesn’t matter! I am here now by my own will! This decision and these feelings are my own, and they will remain even if my body is crushed and my soul cut to pieces! I need Sir Alus so that I can be myself...!”

Once she’d said her piece, she closed her mouth and held her hands in front of her chest, as if praying that this situation was all just a bad dream.

“Don’t be stupid! ... Damn it!” Alus’ focus wavered for a moment because of his anger, setting Gra Eater free. And having picked out Loki as its next target, fangs of black mana stretched down to surround her.

Just as he thought he wasn’t going to make it in time, Gra Eater went against his expectations and stopped.

Next, the clear sound of something breaking rang out. The sound came from within Loki’s hands, which she held over her heart.

Loki stared into her hands, seeing there the fragments of the pendant she’d gotten from Alus, embedded with a crystal that changed color depending on the mana inside.





Alus' mana was inside that black gem. It was a precious gem, like a talisman, and had mana sealed within it. The burst of mana had caused Gra Eater to hesitate for a moment. It must have been confused as the same mana as its master came from Loki.

What the shattered pendant gave them wasn't just a single moment of time. Loki stared down at the pendant with a sorrowful expression. There was never any hesitation or fear in her eyes to begin with. She'd come here with a firm resolve.

After its brief pause, Gra Eater moved its fangs closer to Loki once more. A beat later, Alus managed to regain control.

A dust cloud covered the ground, and he looked over in surprise. The long dark fangs had bit into the ground, but Loki wasn't there. Instead, she was lying down right next to Alus, close enough to touch.

"Force...!! When did you..." Alus didn't know that Loki had learned Force and used it in her battle against Fillic. She'd kept it a secret until the day of the tournament as a surprise for him.

"I never thought I'd debut it here, though... I don't think I can move anymore." Loki, on the ground, gazed at Alus' face. Her breathing was ragged. Despite that, she still smiled. And her smile was filled with determination, to the point where Alus realized that saying any more would be pointless.

Force's repeated rapid starts led to major damage to the body, and the bandages that had been around Loki's legs, but which had come loose from her quick movements, were as red with blood as they could get.

"... But at this rate, we'll both die."

"Yes. I will always be together with you. If you are going to die, I will go first. I don't want to be in a world without you for even a second."

"..." Instead of her face being drenched in tears, it was strangely calm. He'd never seen that expression on Loki before. Not to mention it was very different from the kind of face a Magicmaster would make before their death. It was a satisfied smile from the bottom of her heart, as if she was accepting everything as natural.

Alus found it beautiful, but at the same time it aggravated him. "Like hell I'm going to give up!" He was angry at himself for being on the verge of giving up. Angry at himself for accepting death without even fighting to survive. Especially if the reason was his own inexperience. "Loki, if we get back from this... I'll have you put a little more thought into your actions!"

"Yes..."

He wouldn't lament his own death, but in the end he'd been shouldered with the responsibility of one more life. "... Geez, I can't even die an easy death."

"Yes, please assume that I won't forgive you if you close your eyes before me."

Loki's smile became the driving force for Alus to put his resolution into action. He threw his eyes upward. In front of him was a mouth projected from Gra Eater filled with countless fangs.

He sighed, and got up on one knee. "Sheesh, this is the first time I've been this seriously wounded," he joked, perhaps because he could no longer feel the pain.

Showing no concern for Alus' relaxed atmosphere, Gra Eater above stretched out hundreds of tentacles, as if to envelop the surface. It opened its mouth wide. It was unclear whether it was still only targeting Loki, but at this rate they would both be swallowed.

In response, Alus raised his arm in a fluid movement, and once he'd thrust it forward, he quickly opened his hand. "—Don't move." A deeply reverberating voice demanded absolute obedience, leaving no room for objection.

A stupidly large number of tentacles made of mana were reaching out towards Alus and Loki from all sides, before coming to a stop.

Alus' ferocious order was overpowering, as if it could force anything to obey. His cold eyes were filled with the determination to not see anyone get hurt.

Ultimately, Alus' absolute order stopped Gra Eater from moving. But that didn't mean that it wouldn't attack its master. He was aware of that as well. As he'd said before, Gra Eater was like a monster freed from its cage. Moreover, if it developed a sense of self, it would be impossible to control it with will alone.

That's why he'd taken that gamble. Gra Eater was like a newborn animal, and rather than using magical means to bind it, he'd put pressure on its instincts. Truth be told, he was grasping at straws, but fortunately it seemed to have an effect.

The next moment, a change happened in Gra Eater. Eyes opened up everywhere, from its tentacles to its main body. Eyelids of all sizes appeared all over its surface, as if it had kept its eyes closed until now.

"..." Alus stared at the change emotionlessly. Eyes were the primary organ for the sense of sight, and the mass of mana adopting them was a sign that it was starting to perceive the world for itself.

There were now as many eyes on its body as there were stars in the sky, and after a short pause, they all turned to Alus at once.

Despite being faced with this bizarre sight, Alus spoke in a cold tone. "I don't need a power that goes against my will."

It was unclear if it could hear him or not, but the eyes narrowed as if appraising whether he was worthy of being its vessel.

As if to say even that was disrespectful, Alus closed his open hand, forming a fist. With a dry bursting sound, cracks ran across all of Gra Eater's eyes and they slowly began to close.

"Obey..." he said, breaking the silence.



As he clenched his fist, the cracks spread further, and as he put more force into it—all of Gra Eater's eyes shattered. The crushing sounds filled their entire surroundings.

A moment later, Alus' gaze met with the single huge eye in front of him... the eye seemed to smile before shattering like the rest.

Once all of the eyes were gone, the black mass of mana began flowing into Alus' body like a genie being sucked back into its lamp.

Gra Eater had grown to this size. While he'd managed to get hold of the reins once more, taking it all in pretty much assured his death. But he was prepared to die to save and protect Loki.

The intense feeling of the abnormal amount of mana flowing into him jolted his heart. Gra Eater even had the many kinds of mana it had absorbed from eating the Devourer. Unlike the mana used to restore Alus' own mana, it was like a foreign substance that only served as nutrition for Gra Eater. And taking that in felt like it was burning his soul and eroding his mind. It was akin to a feeling of being filled with a certain kind of power.

He felt like he was able to protect someone for the first time. Despite his absolute power as a Magicmaster, it was the first time he'd protected something important to him.

His death, which was supposed to soon follow, showed no signs of coming. A sense of relief came over him and seemed to last a long time, though in reality it was only a few seconds. Then his tense nerves appeared to let go, as raw chills surged through him.

A line of blood ran down from Alus' lips. One line after another... the flow didn't stop. It was like a dam had burst. He began vomiting blood.

He put his hands on his swollen throat, coughing up a dark red stream of blood that stained the ground at his feet.

When Loki saw that, her eyes shot wide open. Her last wish was unceremoniously crumbling before her.

She didn't understand why he was painfully coughing up blood. His words before had been of their future... so he shouldn't meet his end here. At least she thought they'd reached that common understanding.

Finally she realized his true intention. He'd tried to save her at the cost of his own life. Self sacrifice... it was something so unlike him, yet nothing could suit him more. He was more arrogant than anyone, yet he didn't hesitate to put his life on the line.

"No...! This isn't what you promised!"

Ignoring Loki's scream, Alus slumped over and collapsed, as his consciousness drifted away.

"S-Sir Alus!!" Loki raised her head and her eyes opened wide once more. Fear filled her expression and her body trembled. She brought her shaking lips together, and squeezed out in a hoarse voice, "N-No, Sir... Alus... Aaa... Aaa... AAAAAaaaa..."

With his face turned to the side, Alus didn't move. His black hair covered his eyes, making it hard to tell what kind of expression he wore.

Loki's vision started to blur, the landscape becoming distorted, and she only saw the horrifying reality. Her body would no longer move, but her tears flowed endlessly. Only her imagining of the worst possible outcome spun through her mind. The sole focus of her confused mind was getting closer to him, to his side.

As she sobbed, she struggled and commanded her body with all her might. *Move, move, move, move!* "—Move!!" Her legs were of no use.

But her fingers moved slightly, and her arms slowly rose. Without hesitation, Loki clawed into the ground, using all her strength to raise her upper body. Her thin elbows folded under the pressure, though, and she collapsed onto the ground again.

With Gra Eater gone from the sky, the sun shone mercilessly down on the pair. To Loki, it seemed cruel and hateful. If she was going to have to witness a scene like this, she should have gone with him from the start. Selfishly forced her way in, and died before him.

With mud and tears on her face, Loki rose up again. Still lying on her stomach, she clawed into the ground. It didn't matter if her nails came off. She wouldn't even acknowledge the pain.

None of this could be real. If she could reach her destination, surely she would wake up from this nightmare.

Loki desperately crawled along the ground. He was so close, yet it felt like she had an endless distance to cross. But if she continued to reach out, she believed that she could get to him as she continued to drag herself ever closer with her fingers.

Perhaps from an overuse of Force, each time she pulled herself closer, intense pain ran through her body. But it didn't matter. She would make her way to him even if she had to crawl like a caterpillar, even if she could only move a few centimeters at a time. If she could get closer to him, there was meaning in her desperate struggle. Even if she lost her fingers by a centimeter for every centimeter she approached, she would still continue.

At the same time, dark feelings ran through her mind. She didn't want to taste this kind of despair... She hated this, hated everything... and most of all she hated herself for not being able to do anything but crawl along the ground.

Loki endured overwhelming sobs, and kept crawling beneath the glaring sun. Her beautiful silver hair had lost its sheen from all the dirt, but she put more strength into her fingers to keep moving forward. Behind her was a trail of blood from wounds bleeding so profusely that bandages weren't enough to stop them.

Mustering up the last of her strength, Loki threw herself forward... and her hand finally reached Alus' back. With her blood-stained fingers, she grabbed at his shoulder.

And with that, she was finally able to pull her face up to Alus' face, the two being upside down to each other.

She gazed at Alus, and something hot dropped down on his dirty cheek. "Sir Alus...?" Limply lifting up her arm soaked in blood, she used her little finger to brush away the hair from his eyes. The finger had its nail torn off, caked in dirt and blood.

She rested her palm on the unmoving Alus' pale cheek, as if to gently stroke it, before it powerlessly slipped down to the ground.

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"Are you sure we should have let lil Loki go ahead alone, Ms. Rinne?"

"She's more likely to succeed than us," Rinne replied in a calm tone, and Lettie glanced at her.

On their way over to Alus, Rinne had spotted Loki and let Lettie and the squad know about her. When it came to combat, Lettie's squad was superior, and they were greater in number. So where was Rinne's confidence coming from?

That said, she was the only one with a magic eye, and the most knowledgeable about special abilities. "I believe I've said this before, but control isn't just about simple strength, but also mental fortitude. You could call it a complete control of mana; the absolute regulation of all sensory organs and the information from them. Even for a first-rate Magicmaster, doing that consciously would be difficult."

Not only Lettie, but the entire squad was listening to what Rinne was saying.

"That may sound vague to you, but there's still much about special abilities that is unexplained, leaving a lot up to intuition."

Thanks to generations of Magicmasters, many components of everyday magic that required intuition had been researched and refined into theory. But things were different for special abilities. Not only was there little data, but most of those abilities ate away at the user's life.

That's why special ability users needed to rely on something more primitive than theory. It was said that the shrine priestesses and shamans of the past would go deep within to commune with gods and spirits, and like them, the special ability users needed to acknowledge the other existence within them and commune with it.

Their relationships with this other existence were wide and varied, but in Rinne's case, she'd established a co-existent relationship. She was one of the few successful examples.

Special abilities were said to be almost like a separate individual within the user. The user truly harbored their special ability, like carrying around another life form inside them. In the case of magic eyes, the magic eye could behave almost as a separate magic power from its user. As special abilities also varied wildly in nature, there were all kinds of ways to handle them, and as a result it would depend heavily on the mental abilities of the host. And the only way for others to influence special abilities users was to stir up their mind through words and actions.

The idea that this would work seemed unbelievable, but when it came to things heavily intertwined in the mind such as magic and special abilities, it was a natural truth. That's why—

"That's why it should be Ms. Loki. Even though she was only recently acknowledged as such, she is Sir Alus' partner. Besides... there's no way we could stop her. We don't have any way to contact her to tell her to join us." Rinne recalled seeing Loki's desperate look. "All we can do is reach our destination as soon as possible. If we can act as decoys, that's good enough. What do you think, Lady Lettie?"

"Well, if that's what you say, we don't have any problem with it."

"Thank you very much... not to mention, there is actually one method that can be used in the worst-case scenario." Rinne reached behind, pointing to the quiver on her back.

"That's..." Lettie stared at the arrows for a few moments, then let out an astonished voice as she realized Rinne's intent. "... You can't be serious."

Rinne looked at Lettie with intensity in her gaze. "The worst case would be that thing making its way to Balmes. It's a threat beyond an SS-class. But a special ability disappears when it loses its host..."

"Ms. Rinne, we came here to prevent that!" Lettie said, with almost murderous bloodlust.

"Lady Lettie, it's not like I'm trying to kill Sir Alus. This arrow is engraved with a magic circle to inhibit actions. The material it's made of also amplifies the magic. You could say that he would temporarily cease all life functions. It's my first time using it, but if I could shoot Sir Alus with this, then it just might work."

Ironically, it was the same reasoning and conclusion that Alus had reached, and Rinne's face was calm and filled with determination. "He'll end up in a state of suspended animation, but I don't know how the results will play out. He might lose consciousness and not wake up, and there's no guarantee that his special ability would disappear. But in the event that Ms. Loki fails... this will be the only option we have."

"Just in the worst-case scenario, right...?" Lettie muttered, putting her bloodlust away. With a sullen face, she let out a sigh. "I don't want to let it happen, but Allie's a soldier too... but don't think you'll be able to send that flying because you want to. A soldier always gives it everything they've got, after all."

Rinne answered with a nod. However, there was one thing she had kept quiet about that Lettie didn't seem to realize. The special ability had the power to absorb mana. If that power included Alus' own body...

In order for the arrow to have an effect, it needed to directly penetrate the body. But if his body was clad in the same power to absorb all mana, then its spell would never manifest.

In that case... the arrow would simply penetrate as any arrow would, and would pierce his heart. The way Alus was now, he wouldn't be able to block it.

And that was why she prayed... *Ms. Loki... please.*

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Lettie and Rinne arrived near the center of the crater, where they saw a collapsed Alus with the blood drained from his face, and an unconscious Loki next to him.

The squad was relieved to see that Loki still drew breath, but a chill ran down their spines when they saw a pale-faced Lettie lift up the motionless Alus, a dark foreboding feeling coming over them.

## **Forty-First Chapter**

### **Bystander Lurking in the Twilight**

The huge signs of battle were strewn across the ground, and remnants of the massive spells remained in the air even now.

There was also a massive crater-like hole stretching a kilometer in diameter next to the deposit. But now that it was all over, there was no human presence nearby.

The sun was finally starting to set, the light shining down on the wasteland growing dim.

A figure was walking inside the hole, casually making their way to the center where that fierce battle had taken place a few hours before. Beautiful white hair hung down from the person's shoulders, fluttering in the wind like a woman's long hair.

The figure wore a long coat with blue and white stripes, and had their hands shoved into their pockets. It was just barely possible to make out that he was male with his tall and slim body, but even that took a few moments to determine, the reason being that he had an unreal presence to him. His presence and form were incredibly vague. It was clear he was no ordinary person, as his every movement gave off an abnormal atmosphere.

As the sun set, he muttered to no one in particular, "Ms. Elise is as cautious as always, I see. I assumed that Hazan would run rampant, but she managed to rein him in well enough. I had hoped they would finish off the ranked No. 1 there, but I guess that was asking for too much. Still, it appears that he is more troublesome than anticipated... Alus Reigin."

The tone of his voice was as high and clear as a woman's, but it seemed to take on a bitter tinge at the end. However, his face peeking out from his neatly cut bangs wore a fearless smile. "Hmm... just who would come to a remote place like this?" he muttered.

"Did you hear that Elise and that idiot Hazan went up against Rusalca's scion...?"

No one else but the man was supposed to be here, yet a woman's voice rang out. Shortly after, she appeared in the corner of his eye, wearing exactly what you'd expect from a sociable city girl.

She had a truly calm and simplistic atmosphere to her. That said, it would be one thing if they were in a town, but as they were on a battlefield in the Outer World, that only made her all the more unsettling.

The woman, Dakia, held her arms behind her back and casually kicked a pebble on the ground. The small gesture was perfectly fitting for a plain city girl, but there was a sense of deliberateness to her actions.

"What a surprise. To think you survived."

"Surprised? With that kind of cold attitude?" the mischievous voice said from behind him, but the man showed no sign of turning around as he continued on his walk to the center of the hole.

"Not at all, I am quite surprised, you see. You were supposed to have been killed by Alus Reigin, after all. But I suppose it wouldn't be all that surprising, knowing you... So, did Elise properly finish Jean Rumbulls off? I am expecting much from her."

"Didn't you hear it from her? Unfortunately, he managed to escape... it seems."

Hearing Dakia's reply, the man snorted as he finally came to a stop.

The entire area near the center of the crater was stained a blackish brown. Those who knew what had happened here some hours ago would realize that it was the blood that Alus had spilled.

The man pulled his hand out of one pocket and put it on his chin as he thought. Considering his expression, however, it didn't look like he was thinking at all. But he must have come here with a certain objective in mind. "With this, that person won't complain. If anything, I am sure to receive a high evaluation. Godma's research wasn't in vain... that man did some fine work."

Godma Barhong had come close to establishing a means to enhance humans, but with those defects, they would have been difficult to put to use anyway. It might have gone differently if he'd had the latest research data, but those plans were crushed by the ranked No. 1.

But based on the results, the data the man had received was good enough. The plan might have gone awry, but ultimately it was only delayed, and it might even wind up turning into something better than expected.

The man held his arm out over the blackish-brown stain. Within a few seconds several red drops floated up from the ground, as if being squeezed upward. Only the liquid was extracted, leaving the dirt and sand behind, and the blood formed a sphere the size of a fist.

He stared at the blood, and pulled his other hand out of its pocket. In it was what looked like a test tube. With a familiar motion, he opened the lid with his thumb, and the red liquid flowed into the tube as if it was being absorbed.

Closing the lid, the man stared at the test tube filled with red liquid with a satisfied expression, and put it back in his pocket. And then, as if suddenly recalling something, he said, "I see, so Jean Rumbulls wasn't eliminated either... well, the situation being as it was, they probably didn't use the Four-Tail. So, Ms. Dakia, do you have any intentions of returning..."

The woman interrupted the man with a laugh. With the sun lighting her up from behind, she wore an arrogant smile. "Sorry, but I got in the way. You should teach them better... Besides, I'm more interested in your coming to collect that... Mekfis. Or do you perhaps go by Enouve now...?"

The edges of the man's lips, which had lifted up, now sank down. And he replied in a tone full of hostility, "Hmm, it's been a long time since I went by that name. By the way, Enouve is not a name I gave myself... it was simply the name used for that place." An archaic smile came over the man once called Mekfis.

And then his expression changed, as something clicked for him. "I see, so that's how it is. You... learned something there, didn't you? I thought it was strange that a troublesome Fiend would appear near the deposit. You can be pretty heartless. Oh, and by the way, whose body is that?"

"Who knows? If you tell me what you're going to use that blood for, I might feel like telling you."

"Hmph, so you say... you have no intention of telling me, do you? So... who are you going to side with?"

Dakia let out an empty laugh, her white teeth showing as she did. "The side that would be more convenient for me! Since we're old friends, I was thinking of overlooking you as long as you didn't get in my way, buuuut—I guess that won't work, will it?"

Mekfis smiled wryly at Dakia's jesting. "I wonder. However, I'd rather not get involved with you. I always did have a hard time getting a read on you," he told her, turning around, as if speaking to an old friend, while he played around with the test tube with one hand.

The atmosphere between them was anything but casual. Neither had any reason to oppose the other for the moment, so they were merely exchanging empty words.

Soon Mekfis' long white hair fluttered as he shrugged, tiring of this pointless waste of time. "It's a shame to say, but my time is limited." His eyes gazed into the distance. He'd sighted several people coming this way.

"Yes, so it seems... I think I'll take my leave now." Dakia spun on her heel, as if she'd been out on a walk, but turned to look over her shoulder at Mekfis. Her face was an expressionless void, her empty eyes even cloudier now. "Audeogecht, the Fourth Book of Fegel."

"—!!"

Dakia's parting remark caused Mekfis to narrow his eyes.

The next moment, her body dispersed into the sunlight. It was like all of the blood in her body had abruptly burst out without warning.

Blood rained down, and a putrid odor rose up. Some of the blood splattered onto Mekfis' cheek, which he licked up. "A corpse... so it was a puppet, as expected."

He'd seen Dakia as a problem and decided to eliminate her, but it seemed that it was pointless after all. He'd vaguely expected as much. She was the greatest authority when it came to this kind of magic. Her real body was somewhere else, as she remotely controlled a temporary body.

"I'll need to report this to that person. Whoops, it looks like they're arriving sooner than expected... so this face would be bad."

Out of the Magicmasters making their way here, one was faster than the rest. Mekfis turned his back to them and grinned. The next moment, his body twisted and distorted. His hair turned a deep red color as his entire body changed shape.

Before long, his height, body type, facial features, eye color and so on, had all changed into something completely different. His chin had stubble,



his hair was disheveled, and his body was covered in thick muscles. His clothing had changed from the robe he wore before into an official Balmes military uniform.

After his body had taken on its new appearance, Mekfis, or rather the man who'd been Mekfis just before, asked himself in a deep voice, "Now, who was this again? Well, there's no doubt it was one of Balmes' Magicmasters... I can't be bothered remembering the names of everyone I kill." Either way, in this form he wouldn't arouse too much suspicion in the approaching Magicmasters.

"Hm?! This guy can only use magic at this level? Why did I even bother remembering him... he'll be useful this time, but I should really sort things out." The man awkwardly scratched his stubble, and scowled at the sense that nothing felt right.

After collecting himself, he gazed at his uniform pocket. "But this is extraordinary. I can hardly wait. But it looks like I'll have to hold off on trying it for the time being..." With an ecstatic expression, he touched the pocket, confirming the sensation of the test tube inside.

His current appearance would do for now, but if he were to transform into the owner of the blood he'd just collected, he'd stand out too much. So for now, he ran towards Balmes in this poorly performing body. His speed was less than half of what it had been before, so this body must've been a Triple or a Quad.

The power to change into the body of anyone he'd memorized was Mekfis' ability. However, the abilities of the body he transformed into were brought along with it, so there were problems at times.

Moreover, while he could handle bodies inferior to his own without problems, whether he could use the spells of those superior to him relied purely on his own techniques. And while his appearance changed, his amount of mana didn't.

Even with these flaws, this power had plenty of uses. And with Godma's research, he was now able to replicate the information from blood.

In the past, whenever he changed into a body, he could only use superficial information such as spells they specialized in and their affinities. It was just a small sample size that could be scooped up from the mana information.

But now, his power had been refined to be able to copy all of the spells they could use. He was able to accurately read their information from taking in their blood.

However, that was limited to the fixed information on mana and magic. He wasn't able to extract any experiences or memories from the blood. But at least, he could make the body's specs and magic specialization into his own.

That's why the blood he'd gathered was enough to make him overjoyed. "This will make for a great show... I wonder what kind of face you'll make

when that time comes, or will you simply be led around by the nose? Either way, I'll get to see a wonderful dance of ruination."

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At Balmes' military headquarters, various high-ranking Magicmasters, including Singles, were arriving and gathering.

In the midst of this, Lettie and her squad came in, carrying Alus and Loki. That sparked an uproar, and it would probably only be a matter of time before the commotion would spread beyond headquarters.

Berwick had taken on the overall command of operations, and after hearing a direct report from Lettie on the elimination of the Devourer, he was told of Alus' injuries, which caused a deep crease in his brow. He'd managed to come out of it alive, but his condition was critical.

He had known Alus since before he was a Magicmaster. Alus had taken on plenty of grueling missions in the past, but he'd never been this seriously injured before.

After seeing the two being carried into the emergency room, Berwick got very busy. As for what drove him, he wasn't just confirming facts, but he also had a bigger question in the back of his mind.

That's when Lettie said to him, "Governor-General, this is about Allie's power!" There was anger in her voice, and she glared at Berwick.

"What are you talking about?" Berwick tried to brush her off, but at the same time he seemed to realize something about Alus' condition. Alus was no doubt the biggest contributor to the mission's success, but he had an idea of what might have happened. "—!! Don't tell me it ran rampant!!"

His expression froze, and a moment later he realized he'd shouted this out. "Actually, this is a bad place for this. I'll listen to your report in a different room."

"..." Lettie wordlessly followed after Berwick as he left the room, her eyes fixed on his back which almost seemed to be shaking. His fist was also firmly clenched.

That's when another person stopped them. "Commander, I ask to be allowed to attend as well. If this was an enemy capable of pushing Alus that much... even if it was eliminated, if it really was an SS-class, we need to know more about it to prepare for all scenarios."

Calling out to them was Rusalca's Single, Jean Rumbulls. He had a couple of subordinates with him, and wore a serious expression.

He'd returned to Balmes after his battle with Kurama, and had only just finished receiving basic treatment. There was still a bandage wrapped around his arm, but he showed no other signs of injury as he and his subordinates stared at Berwick. It was unclear where Jean had learned about Alus' special ability, or how much he knew, but it appeared he knew at least some of it.

Lettie cursed his poorly-timed arrival in her mind. She personally didn't like him, but there was also the fact that the Governor-General had kept

Alus' special ability a secret even from another Single like her. Letting another country's Single probe into it was going too far.





And sure enough... "Sir Jean, I am grateful for your aid. If not for that, Alpha's mission might have been completely derailed."

Jean clearly wanted to say something more to justify his presence, but Berwick skillfully cut his flow off. "I've been left with the duty of overall command. So I will listen to the report first, and then I will create a written report to publish to all the nations. So you'll have to settle for the mission being successful for the time being. That aside, you are still on a defense mission. Just because the SS-class has been eliminated doesn't mean you can let your guard down. The Outer World is still in an uproar, and there are reports of abnormal appearances of Fiends."

As a result of the Devourer taking out the Fiends around it, those that survived had begun migrating elsewhere. Because of that, the previously established territories of high-classed Fiends had changed. "At any rate, you can't be too careful. Without the support of others, this nation might not even be able to withstand a small invasion. Right now we need to compile the reports, cross-check everything including their authenticity, and take new measures as soon as possible."

"With all due respect, as Rusalca's representative, I have the right to receive that report as well," Jean said, refusing to back down. Even though he and Alus were friends, he had always felt that there was something mysterious about him. And that thought had turned to conviction during the rulers conference.

Information on Singles was usually kept confidential, but in Alus' case it had gone to extreme lengths. Rusalca had approached Alpha for information on him a number of times, including when the two nations had worked together on a joint operation. Of course, they had received nothing.

"That's enough, Jean Rumbulls!" a loud voice echoed through the hallway, making everyone stop.

All turned to look in the direction of the voice, finding a man in the prime of his life slowly making his way over with his arms behind his back. His strides were long and imposing. The clothes he wore were less suitable for a ruler, being more practically focused, as if he was going to lead troops into battle.

"Lord Haorge!"

"Jean, what we need to focus on is solidifying defenses and eliminating the threat of Fiends. There are Fiends prowling in the Outer World that could strike at any moment to take advantage of this opportunity... they'll need to be mopped up to keep them in check. Besides, the target was eliminated, wasn't it, Governor-General Berwick?"

"There's no doubt about it."

"Alpha was only supposed to send out a recon force, but... I hear it even included Singles. I can't figure out what your nation is planning, but the people present at the time the decision was made weren't the best ones to decide on a policy. At any rate, if the threat is gone, then nobody is going to

complain. That's just how it is, Jean. If you have any further complaints, you can save it until everything's over."

"I understand..." Jean nodded his head grudgingly.

"Good, that's how it should be. Of course, all of the reports will be shared," Haorge Maizon Jecopheres, Iblis' ruler, added, as if picking up on Jean's concern. He turned to Berwick. "Just leave the defense to us, Governor-General Berwick. Also... I assume you heard about Hydrange's delay?"

"Yes, it seems they still haven't left their borders. I received a report that Clevideet will soon arrive. They'll be positioned north of Hydrange." Balmes and Iblis were neighbors, so Iblis' forces would position themselves near their own borders—an attempt to alleviate any worries that another nation might strike at the opportunity and invade. Balmes was located to the northeast of Babel, and Hydrange was north of Balmes. To the southeast was Iblis, and further south of Iblis was Clevideet.

However—"You don't have to worry about Iblis. We still have enough forces in our nation. If Hydrange is going to be late, we will take on defending the north. So position Clevideet around Iblis' side. Halcapdia should be arriving from the north. Just send a message to them and have them join up with us. Once we have the numbers, we'll be able to cover a decent amount of the area."

"Thank you very much."

"I'll have Vajet come on over." Haorge turned his attention to the comms in his ear. "You heard that?" he said, contacting the ranked No. 2, Iblis' Vajet Olagram.

"Might I take on that duty?" Jean asked, staring right at Haorge. Then he turned to Berwick. "It should get dark in about an hour. Rather than wait for other nations to arrive, please leave the elimination of the surrounding Fiends to us."

"... I understand. But you are still injured. I'll need at least fifty to defend the line."

"My squad alone will be more than enough. Besides, if this kind of scratch kept me from handling my job, I wouldn't be able to face my subordinates," Jean said with a smile. It was as if he was saying he could handle this mission on his own.

"Do as you please, then. But in exchange, sunset will be your time limit."

Jean straightened his posture, saluting Berwick, before turning on his heel and instructing his subordinates behind him.

Incidentally, Berwick had intended to contact Haorge, so this was good timing. After seeing Jean and his subordinates off, he got down to business. "Lord Haorge, I'd like to ask about that person..."

Before Berwick could even finish his sentence, Haorge stopped him with a hand gesture, smiling. "That person has already arrived. It was understood that this situation required some heavy lifting."

"I see..." Berwick looked relieved.

“Your two Magicmasters should be receiving treatment now.”

Haorge’s skillful handling of the situation was probably due to his past as a commander in the military. The fact that he’d commanded on the frontlines in spite of his noble status signified that in Iblis the position of ruler wasn’t just for show, and he still held considerable influence within the military. Because of that, Haorge’s skills in politics and military matters were well known throughout not only Iblis, but all of the human domain.

Meanwhile, Lettie’s squad had gathered in a room with haggard looks on their faces.

They’d all been assigned private rooms, but none of them made any move to leave. An awkward atmosphere dominated the room. Lettie had ordered them to get some rest, but nobody was doing so. The state of Alus wore too heavily on their minds.

All the Magicmasters here knew just how much the existence of the ranked No. 1 supported the Magicmasters in military service. Losing him would mean that they had lost not only significant military power, but also that humanity had lost its support. His existence was an irreplaceable treasure. The fact that they hadn’t been able to be of help to him when he needed it the most made them feel pathetic.

In this oppressive atmosphere, one person was typing on a virtual keyboard at a desk. She shared the same state of mind as the others, but this paperwork was the perfect distraction.

The woman, Rinne, got to work immediately after taking a shower. A detailed mission report needed to be written, so she wanted to get to it while the memories were still fresh in her mind.

Normally, she’d only need to report verbally, and she had a secretary she used for that, but this time she had a reason not to do so. The report Lettie had given to her subordinates included a specific instruction. And they’d all come to an agreement to leave a certain detail out of the report.

To use the word “fake” to describe the report would be too extreme. If Rinne were to say, it could be called a simple slip of the pen. Being as serious as she was, she felt some guilt doing this, but Lettie had made it clear that this was under directions from the Governor-General.

*Alus Reigin’s injuries were from his battle against the Devourer, a result of the after-effect of its self-destruction... moments later, he used Black Ikazuchi to erase the target from existence, but it unexpectedly caused a super anti-magic explosion, creating a crater-like hole over 1 kilometer in diameter...*

She felt truly guilty as she wrote, but her hands wouldn’t stop, and she ran the text through her mind to confirm it. The focus of the report was the elimination of the Devourer. Anything after that could be considered redundant. Not to mention that when it came to Alus’ secret, Cicelnia would have likely given her the same instructions.



Rinne used that reasoning to convince herself, her wet hair fluttering as she pulled her chin in. After glancing around the room, she returned to her virtual keyboard and screen as if to escape from the heavy atmosphere.

The uncomfortable time was passing terribly slowly. While she'd only spent a little time together with the squad, she didn't feel like she could be the only one to retreat to her personal room. That was why she was trying her best to distract herself with busywork.

*She sighed to herself. I hope Lady Lettie will come back soon.*

As for that Lettie... she was currently standing in front of a certain room after giving her umpteenth report to Berwick. It was the emergency room that Alus had been carried into.

She leaned against the door and closed her eyes. The heavy door was locked and showed no sign of opening. It had been over three hours since Alus had disappeared inside.

Loki had come out an hour ago after receiving emergency treatment. She'd suffered aggravated but few injuries and mental exhaustion, and her life hadn't been in danger. But the speed of her restoration was thanks to a healing Magicmaster who was at work in the emergency room even now.

The room was specialized for healing, its walls and floor made from precious gems that blocked out mana. When it was active, one could deploy a massive magic circle on its floor that was highly efficient, capable of absorbing even the mana remnants in the air. In a sense, the entire room was like a healing barrier.

The magic circle was active now, and was without a doubt the strongest healing spell known to humankind. And its creator was in the same room, treating Alus.

When Loki was carried out on a stretcher, Lettie asked to be let in, but was refused entry. As a Single, she could easily flow mana unconsciously, and there were concerns that her mana might disturb the magic in the place. And it was because she understood this, not wanting to leave anything up to chance, that she had been waiting outside the room for over two hours now.

It wasn't just that she was worried about Alus. Simply put, she wanted some time alone to think.

*Lettie was trying to wrap her head around the information about Alus' hidden power that she'd heard from the Governor-General. That kind of special ability is definitely the natural enemy of Fiends... but I guess it's a double-edged sword that could also be turned against humans...*

Starting off, Berwick had told her about the first case of the special ability running rampant that he knew of. As Alus' overwhelming combat capability had begun to bud, Berwick, who'd heard about the special ability from Alus himself, had immediately established a temporary squad.

It was a special forces squad with Vizaist as its captain. The selection of personnel was probably a coincidence, but making the sharp Vizaist Alus' superior had worked out for the best.

After that, Alus had been assigned to missions to accurately measure the potential of his special ability. Berwick had also set up a research team to investigate special abilities, but they had been unable to come up with any results.

At the time, it was clear that Alus' power was overwhelming against Fiends. The information was designated as top secret, and he was given secret training and missions to bring the power under control.

And just as Alus' control training was starting to show results... the ability ran rampant for the first time.

On that day, a large-scale force of Fiends had moved on Alpha, and shortly after Alus' deployment, the incident happened.

All Fiends within a several hundred meter radius disappeared at once. From what Berwick had heard from Vizaist, he'd had a hard time covering up the incident.

With a wry smile, Berwick told Lettie he'd felt like he had discovered the beginning of humanity's counterattack. However, the problems that came with it weren't that easily resolved. They were unable to completely figure out the specifics of the ability, or how to perfectly control it, meaning that they couldn't publicly announce it.

An overwhelming power could sometimes create fear. And using the word *control* pointed to a certain degree of risk, which could give way to unwarranted speculation. It was unclear what kind of price they would have to pay if something happened.

When thinking of the disasters of the past, Berwick chose to continue to use Alus. At times, one needed to become a monster to take one down. He felt that this power that exceeded human knowledge needed to be used.

But there were few who shared his thinking. And the top brass at the time were unable to accept the suggestion.

*But... putting everything on his shoulders is just cruel.*

No, perhaps the Governor-General was willing to accept that for the sake of humanity's survival. To lead Alus to become a Magicmaster who could carry the future of the nation—no, of all of humanity.

Maybe that was why he'd kept it a secret all this time, slowly starting negotiations with other nations, especially major ones like Rusalca, to remove obstacles in his way. He was taking the steps to get them to admit that this power was important and necessary for humanity. All to ensure that Alus could someday walk down the path of light.

His reclaiming of a continent on his own was one of his biggest achievements, but announcing that would only make the other nations suspect something, and they'd struggle to accept it as the truth. Since the person in question was still only sixteen years old, it would cast doubt on his achievements and only have the opposite effect, which was why the truth was kept vague.

Of course, a complete cover-up wouldn't work in their favor either. They would sometimes let some of the truth slip out, so that once Alus grew up

and his position was solidified, the full story of his achievements would be beyond question... or at least Lettie hoped so.

*So Allie's retirement should have hurt the Governor-General quite a bit... serves him right, Lettie mischievously chuckled to herself. Gra Eater, mana that only eats mana, huh... It was a special ability she'd never heard of before.*

Mana was said to be the life force. And Lettie realized that its behavior of greedily devouring was just like that of a Fiend's. That's why there would be people who would distrust that ability. That was probably the reason why Berwick hadn't shared the information too widely within Alpha.

In the worst case, the ability would be met with extreme resistance, and maybe some would even move to have it eliminated entirely. And if that happened, there'd be more than one or two who would end up getting caught up in it. Not only would it not protect Alus, it would put Berwick's position at risk, too. That might also lead humanity one step closer to ruin. And the fools responsible for it would inch ever closer to a living hell, unaware of the consequences.

*But in for a penny, in for a pound as they say. Sometimes it's a necessary evil...*

Because Lettie was lost in thought, her reaction to what happened next was a little delayed. The doors to the emergency room finally opened.

The first thing Lettie did was to rush the doors and question the greatest healing Magicmaster, the Saint of Iblis, who was leaving the room. "Lady Nexolis, how is Allie...?"

The Saint of Iblis had deep wrinkles and an unhappy look on her face. "So you are still here, lass. I don't know who you think you are, but don't underestimate me. My back might hurt now, but I only came out to get some air."

"E-Excuse me. I'm Lettie Kultunca, one of Alpha's Single Digit Magicmasters." But from what Lettie could tell, Nexolis didn't have as much composure as her words might make it sound. The drops on her forehead spoke volumes of how exhausted she was.

*Still, so this is who was once called a saint... She snuck a glance at the woman again.*

The woman who was tapping her bent back was in her mid-70s. Rolling down the sleeves of her coat, she let out a heavy sigh. If not for her clothes, she'd look like your average old woman. One might expect a certain degree of beauty from a saint. Unfortunately, Lettie didn't know how she'd looked in her younger days, but there was no doubting her ability as a healing Magicmaster.

"Hmph! So yer the gal from Alpha... forcing yet another one to go too far. I just can't ever like your nation. Still, if that kid's the current ranked No. 1, what is this world coming to..."

"T-That's..."

"Well, even if you say it, it can't be helped. It's not like I can't understand, though. Any nation would want to use someone with that much mana. But why is that kind of monster here to begin with? Did he wander in from some other world?"

"I-I don't know that, but there's no doubt that Allie's the greatest Magicmaster in history!" Lettie proudly boasted, but Nexolis only snorted and turned away.

... When her body suddenly stumbled. "Whoa... so where are you headed?" Lettie asked, hurrying over to support her.

"What? I was just thinking of getting a look at the mug of someone I saved in the past, while getting some air."

Lettie didn't know who that was, but she was still worried about Alus' state. And Nexolis could see right through her. "Don't worry, lass. That kid's stable for the time being. He doesn't have a scratch left on him. At any rate we can't move him yet, so for now we wait and see as the healing sets in. I don't know the details, but he's been taking in more mana than his vessel can handle. You could say that there's a bomb strapped to his heart, so it's best not to tamper with him. Or rather... there's nothing we can do."

"So will Allie wake up?"

"Who knows? At the very least we'll have to wait until the mana conforms to him and settles down. I've done what I can, so the rest is up to the kid."

Lettie glanced at the door Nexolis had come out of, and looked back at her. Nexolis had always been a pioneer in the field of healing magic. One could even call her a living legend. She'd developed healing magic that had originally only worked on superficial wounds and had taken it to this level, where the body's natural healing was sped up through magic. Nobody else had even come close to her achievements.

She was a healing Magicmaster working for Iblis, but her fame had spread from long ago. She'd saved countless Magicmasters wounded in battle against Fiends, as well as civilians that even doctors had given up on. By now she was retired from the military and had her own small clinic, but her research continued to this day. With all of this in mind, she was definitely worthy of being called a saint.

"Thank you so much," Lettie deeply thanked her.

"If you're going to say yer thanks, how about you carry me? All that standing's bad for this old body of mine."

Lettie hurriedly knelt down on the ground, turning her back to the old woman. "Of course, so where to...?"

"To a sniveling little boy, of course," the Saint of Iblis said, as she grinned.

## **Forty-Second Chapter**

### **The Density of Silence**

Two weeks had passed since the elimination of the Devourer.

At the moment, the other six nations were taking over the defense of Balmes. Meanwhile, there were regular meetings between the various nations' rulers and Governors-General regarding the handling of affairs.

The biggest topic was the defense of Balmes, which had lost most of its Magicmasters. As a means to alleviate the problem, dispatching Magicmasters from the other nations was proposed, and was immediately brought to a vote that was unanimously agreed upon.

The Magicmasters wouldn't include any Singles, but would instead be made up of a number of Doubles to keep up a certain standard. They would defend Balmes for the time being.

After a discussion with the various rulers, it was decided that Balmes' ruler Holtal Qui Balmes would be forced to abdicate from his position, with his blood relatives losing any right of inheritance.

Gagareed was court-martialed for his crimes, but thanks to Alpha working behind the scenes, he avoided the death penalty. He would never return to the military, spending the rest of his life in a remote region as a relatively lenient punishment.

A suitable candidate for a replacement ruler was selected from the royalty of the old Rohm kingdom. And the next Governor-General would be the female general who had attended the Friendship Magical Tournament with Holtal. Nilhinn Corder was in her mid-50s, with thirty years of military service under her belt. She was popular within the military and was hailed as a moderate. As a pure noble, there were no objections to her new role.

Normally it was the ruler who appointed the Governor-General, but it would take some time to appoint a ruler, so a special exception was made.

And with that... the aftermath was dealt with. The high officials and Singles of the various nations returned home.

Balmes had been struck by a grave incident, but that was all the more reason to strengthen the defenses in their own nations.

As a result, the only Single to remain in Balmes... was Alus. The reason was that he still hadn't woken up, and due to his condition, it wasn't easy to move him. The healing Magicmasters who had assisted Nexolis returned to their own nations as well, leaving the emergency room eerily silent.

Alus lay on top of the bed, quietly continuing to sleep. The room was pure white, and, with the exception of the magic circle, looked like a regular hospital room. Though it might edge out such, thanks to the lack of chemical smells.

That said, there was no melancholic feel to it because of the people coming in to check on him at regular intervals, as well as the faintly glowing magic formula.

A dry breeze blew in from the window, making the curtains flutter. And a refreshing fragrance came from the fruit brought by someone who came by each day.

Complete silence filled the room, and time passed peacefully.

Suddenly, Alus' hair was brushed by a playful wind. A visitor had arrived.

The door quietly slid open, and she took care to not let her footsteps make any sound. She didn't knock because she knew no one else was inside. It seemed she was careful not to make noise out of concern for Alus, but unfortunately she couldn't hide the sounds her crutches made.

The girl, Loki, had visited at the same time every morning since she'd woken up. That said, there was nothing she could do but sit at Alus' side. But she loyally continued to do so as if it were her duty as his partner. She even volunteered to do the simple tasks such as taking his temperature and pulse.

With silent but unsteady steps, she made her way to Alus' bed, as her silver hair fluttered. And then, like always, she sat down on a stool next to the bed, and bent over to peer at his face.

Her injuries should have healed to the point that she could walk without assistance, but Loki was reluctant to stop using the crutches. It was as though she was scared that this would mean she'd have to return to Alpha and leave Alus behind.

When she'd first woken up, she had worried more about Alus than herself. She'd calmed down a bit by now, but she was still uneasy. Most of all, she wanted someone to be here when Alus woke up. And if possible, she wanted to be that someone.

That was why Loki stayed at Alus' side each day.

"Sir Alus, if you don't hurry and wake up... you won't have enough attendance days." Today, too, she called out to him about trivial topics. And as always, there was no reply.

Loki shook her head in denial, as the fear that he might not ever wake up came to her again. She'd lost count of how many times that thought had appeared in her head. In the silent room, the only thing that managed to calm her down was Alus' breathing.

She'd been told he'd wake up someday... but as the days passed, she grew increasingly restless. When would that day come? And would he actually wake up? Maybe the treatment being a success was a lie?

"Sir Alus... at this rate I really will..." She was on the verge of being unable to forgive anyone. The military and their reliance on him, the ruler who'd forced this danger on him, Lettie and Rinne who hadn't made it in time. And most of all, herself for being unable to do anything.

All she could do was let it out with a heavy sigh. But that wasn't going to wake Alus up.

She dreamed of being able to talk about nothing in particular with him one more time. His naivety and the fact that one could take advantage of that didn't matter to her anymore.

Alus had been like a different person ever since he'd enrolled at the Institute. That had felt incredibly off to her, but now, it was just a tiny problem. She'd realized that it didn't matter what she felt; instead, the important thing was how it would help Alus. If it was a good thing for Alus, then she wouldn't say anything about it.

By now she wanted to see how Alus would change and how his future would pan out. She wanted to believe that the time they spent together would continue into tomorrow, and into the future...

"Please wake up, Sir Alus."

Alus was in a deep slumber, as if recovering from all of the deep wounds his soul had sustained... and Loki gave him a smile. As his partner, she did what she could to force a smile and not show the emotions welling up inside of her.

Maybe it was because Frose had given her a push at the party. Or perhaps it was because she'd finally obeyed her heart and taken action. While she was frustrated by her own uselessness, if it wasn't for that decision, she would have felt even more regret.

With all of her emotions coming up, Loki's self-control broke down, and the selfish thoughts she'd tucked away in her small chest began leaking out. The stool wavered as she leaned over, resting her arms on the edge of the bed. She put her head on her arms, rubbing her face against them.

As the blowing wind came in, Loki put her feelings into words. Nobody was listening, but she continued, her eyes not on Alus' face but on his feet. "Please don't leave me alone again... don't take away the meaning of my life... please don't push me away."

She spat out her every grieving thought, but to her it was nothing but selfishness. They were things meant to be kept inside, and disappear with the passage of time. But she never imagined that her feelings would tighten her heart like this. That's why... if she could just let it all out once, she'd be able to return to her usual self tomorrow. No matter what she might say, nobody could fault her if there wasn't anyone around to hear her words. They would simply disappear with the wind.

Once the decision was made, there was no stopping it. And her mouth continued to move. Her lips quivered, but one by one she put the feelings she'd kept tightly locked up inside into words. At the same time, she put everything that had happened between her and Alus in order. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to process it properly.

The work was similar to a little girl weaving her own story into fantasies. It was the story of why Alus was still fast asleep. She made up a suitable villain as a scapegoat and blamed them for everything. However... she was aware that she was part of that villain. That powerlessness and helplessness were Loki's own unforgivable sins.

Finally, Loki's lips, which had been telling this story, closed. In the middle of the story, she recalled a certain scene, causing her expression to change into one of joy. "So you remembered..." she muttered.

Alus had remembered the day they first met, the day she had experienced living hell. "I thought you had forgotten. No, you didn't have to remember it in the first place. To you it was a trivial event, one of the countless missions you accomplished... That's why..." Loki's hair fell into her eyes, covering them and the feelings she showed in them. Her throat and lips trembled.

She cleared her throat... and then continued, "That's why you never had to show me any consideration. With just a single order, I would gladly be your shield or buy time or anything you say. That's all you had to think of me as... so why didn't you do that...?!"

She let out her selfish words, and put on a dry smile. Her self-ridiculing laugh made it clear that she understood the reason better than anyone.

Just like then... he wouldn't forgive that. She'd understood that from the start. Having lost her parents and any hope, the only thing she had left was her trifling life, which she wanted to spend for his sake... that was the only reason she'd worked so hard.

It had been the case then, too. During their first meeting, Loki might have seen exactly what kind of person Alus was. That was why she didn't hesitate to sacrifice her life, and why she had been able to push forward. It was all because Alus was Alus. If her life could be of any use to him, she could die with a smile on her face.

"I tried my best. Desperately, so desperately... I didn't need someone to acknowledge that. The thought of not being at your side was simply too painful."

That was the only way she could see any worth in herself. And not even Loki could stop the words coming out of her mouth. She grabbed hold of the bed sheet in frustration. Her emotions were running out of control and her eyes were threatening to get wet. Everything that was pent up inside her was trying to burst out. Her voice quaked.

"... I won't let that happen."

The voice swept in like a fresh breeze, sounding more gentle than anything, though it coldly rejected her deepest desire. Just the voice alone made her heart want to scream. Those unfair words, that voice, filled her with an almost infinite happiness.

She wanted to see his face as soon as possible, but at the same time she couldn't bring herself to look up. Everything she'd desperately held back wet her downcast eyes, and made her small shoulders tremble.

However, Alus easily undid Loki's control as his hand moved to stroke her silken silver hair as usual. For each stroke, the bulwark around her heart crumbled further. And all Loki could do was sob.



She sobbed uncontrollably, unable to show Alus the mess that was her face. All kinds of feelings whirled within her. Finally warm tears started running as the dam burst. "... Sir Alus, am I of no use to you?"

"That's not true. You're a big help."

"... Sir Alus, I learned how to use Force."

"Yeah, I saw."

While Loki expressed everything she'd held back, Alus simply patted her head. But her next words made him stop for a moment.

"... Sir Alus, I can even use Naruikazuchi properly now."

"I-I see. You did good." With a bitter smile, he somehow managed to keep a calm front, telling her what she wanted to hear. That was of course out of the ordinary, but it wasn't exactly in the realm of the unreachable... though he couldn't say that in this atmosphere.

"I'll work even harder, so please let me stay at your side."

Each and every tearful word had weight to it, and hit Alus directly.

"Well, it appears I've still got much to learn myself... this incident really brought that point home. You really saved me this time. Thank you... Keep it up in the future too," Alus said, and closed his eyes.

This was the result of having fought alone. Having fought on the battlefield without rest, he'd lost something. It was only a vague feeling, but it felt like it was an irreplaceable vital piece. And it was unclear if he'd ever be able to get it back.

Alus slowly raised his upper body, prompting Loki to straighten her posture. She rubbed her eyes, violently wiping the tears away. Her eyes were red, but contained an unshakable determination, making them look even more beautiful than usual.

"Sir Alus! Can you promise me something?" Loki stared straight at Alus with more resolve than when she'd asked to become his partner.

"If it's something I can do." Alus unhesitatingly nodded. He wore a sincere expression. At this point, he wasn't going to balk at any promise.

"You really saved me this time around, so I guess you could say we're even now."

"That's not... they could never compare!!" Loki immediately denied this, as if to say that nothing between them could ever compare. Ever since that day, she'd devoted everything to Alus. That meant more than the world to her. Her face was flushed and her body was stiff.

"So, what's the promise?" Alus looked at her with a wry smile. He did have some concern over what she was thinking, but he wasn't planning on going back on his word now.

Loki let out a sharp breath. The curtains fluttered as wind blew into the room. As her silver hair was rustled by the breeze, she gave him a faint smile. "Please don't die before me."





If the world were normal, those were words an elderly couple might exchange near the end of their lives. However, Magicmasters fighting on the frontlines easily lost their lives in this uncertain world. Her words were heavy, laden with her desire. Nothing could make her happier than that. That was why they were so heavy.

And Alus fully understood the meaning behind them. However—"All right, I promise." If that's what she wanted... he would do what he could to fulfill it. After all...

"Of course... you saved me, so you have a duty to live longer than me no matter what, Sir Alus," Loki said, with an exceedingly beautiful smile. "Besides... there's one thing I've understood after this."

Her cheeks red, she continued after a short pause, "And that is that I can't stand living in a world without you."

## Afterword

Four months have passed, and it's nice to meet you again. Izushiro here.

As the author, I'm relieved to have managed to deliver the latest volume in the series. That aside, thank you for reading Volume 7 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*.

Thanks to the great reception from everyone, this series has managed to come this far. Looking back on it, it's been a year and a half since the first volume was published, and it feels like I've finally gotten to the end of my summer homework. The intense summer this year has been carrying on later than usual, and I'm sure it will go on for a while longer. But I can't wait for a cooler autumn to arrive. If this heat could just settle down a little, that would be great.

That said, I still have a lot of space left to fill. I'm the kind of author who struggles with afterwords to the point of wanting to add in a short story. Then again, any story I do come up with ends up as a story-exclusive bonus, so I don't have that many in stock... anyways, joking aside, on to report on the current status. Or I'd like to, but so little happens from day to day that I have nothing to write about.

As I'm writing this afterword, Comiket is taking place. As someone who loves not just books but illustrations, I'd love to go once, but I wouldn't stand a chance in all of that enthusiasm. To the point that I'd probably just turn around and leave...

In the author introduction, there's a line about how weak I am in crowds of people. I mostly wrote it as a joke, but now it's becoming reality... how scary. I'll need to be more careful about my health in the future... but that sounds pretty ominous, so maybe I should change that line?

And now that I've finished exposing how unhealthy I am, it's time to start over. As we switch topics, I'd like to touch on what happened in this volume.

How did you like this volume? All of the plot threads starting in Volume 5 are wrapped up here. Volumes 5-7 make an arc where the magical tournament and Devourer elimination run in parallel. But thinking it over now, the end of this volume is filled with Loki content, so I guess you could call it the Loki episode.

Well, you could tell as much when you look at the character on the spine of the book. As I view my bookshelf now, I can finally see all of the heroines gathered, but for some reason Loki hadn't shown up before. Even the cover and color illustrations are very Loki-focused.

In the book, Loki sees a lot of mental growth, too. I was able to fully write out all of Loki's wishes and emotions that she'd kept locked up. All of that stuffed inside of her is finally unleashed, as she breaks out of her shell and speaks her mind to Alus. The young Magicmaster Loki has had very unique experiences, and she finally prioritizes her feelings.

There is nothing inherently good or bad about such impulses of passion. However, she simply runs over to Alus' side by her own volition... there is no logic to it, as she is just being honest with her feelings. Up until then, Loki had bound herself by the reasoning that she was Alus' partner. As a result, her mind and heart came into conflict. At the end of that conflict, just what does she think and how does she act?

The flow is similar to what I wrote before, but I feel like I was able to put even more heart and passion into it. In short, I'm satisfied that I managed to write what I wanted.

There are also new developments written in, such as the mysterious Mekfis, and the woman with the look of a village girl, Dakia. One could call them the Forgotten and the Wraith.

Dakia, in particular, is a new addition from the web novel version, and just the adding of one character can change the structure of the story so much... It feels like some kind of butterfly effect.

Incidentally, the criminal organization Kurama will play a big part in the story to come, so look forward to it. While this is a battle story, there will be battles, but there are parts of the Friendship Magical Tournament that were abbreviated. Such as the second-year finals between Felinella and Karia in the last volume... if I get the chance, I would love to cover it in more detail, so look forward to that too.

Now then, what will happen in the next volume? As I write this, I realize that the volumes have started stacking up quite a bit. I hope you will look forward to the next one as well.

That should about fill up the space I have, so I'd like to wrap up with my usual thanks.

Miyuki Ruria-sama in charge of illustrations, thank you very much for living up to my crazy requests. I was sure I was going to get a scolding for my recklessness. I told my editor-in-charge that if that was the case, then just tell me off... Thank you for your continued work on this series.

I'd also like to thank said editor-in-charge, T-sama, for always giving me accurate advice. I was in T-sama's care quite a bit this time around too.

Thank you to the proofreaders, designers, printers, and most of all to you for picking up this book.

Finally, thanks to everyone's support, there is now a manga and a special campaign. Its name is The Greatest Heroine Fair. There are luxurious prizes to be had, so check the paper wrapper for instructions on how to enter the drawing.

This afterword has been a little longer than expected, but I'll work my hardest so that we can meet again in the afterword for Volume 8.

—Izushiro







“Why am  
I even in a  
place like  
this...”

The muttered words left her  
lips and disappeared without  
reaching anyone’s ears.








"Sir... Alus..."

If she could get closer to him, there was meaning in her desperate struggle.







**“What do  
you want to do?  
With this desert  
as your footing  
you won’t be  
able to put those  
legs of yours  
to full use.”**

But even so, Helheim covered a vast area.  
The trees had turned to gravel, forming several  
sand dunes where large trees once stood.

## **Bonus Short Stories**

### **The Eccentricities of an Orphan Sponsor**

"Is everyone in position?"

A dignified voice reached everyone through the comms in their ears. That was enough to get them to straighten their postures. The mission they were on was unofficial, but came from the Governor-General himself.

At the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, the Governor-General's direct subordinates, in other words the elites of the elites, were carrying recording equipment into various places at the venue.

The preparations for the tournament management to create their own recordings had already been made. With the Governor-General's direct orders they couldn't afford to cut any corners, even if it was just a match between students...

"Target confirmed, Alice Tilake's first match is commencing. All angles cleared... all objectives cleared. Recording is ready at your command, Governor-General Berwick."

"Good. Don't mess up. I won't forgive it if there's any missed footage."

"Roger!!"

Berwick was anxiously awaiting the start of the match from his VIP room. He could feel his heart pounding, like a father witnessing his daughter's grand debut.

Even at his advanced age, Berwick was still a bachelor. But the way he watched over Alice like she was his own daughter gave rise to a kind of expression that was seldom seen on a Governor-General's face.

At the same time he was very emotional, as if there was a fire lit in his eyes. She'd overcome her past and grown so much, it was hard to believe that she'd once lived in a facility with her spirit broken.

Her friends and the bonds with the people around her must have filled her once empty heart. Thinking about it that way, Berwick felt somewhat redeemed despite only being able to secretly give her financial aid. "Her smile has grown even more beautiful."

"Wow, that's gross," Lettie immediately retorted.

Cicelnia smiled wryly. "I know the details, but your way of support is just abnormal... it almost makes me regret ever appointing you to be Governor-General."

Berwick's temple and cheek twitched at that. The way he clung onto the windowsill in the room might have been less than mature, but even so...

"Now now, Lady Cicelnia and Lettie, you are still too young. The day will come when you too understand this sensation. I feel like this is it... having worked so hard to this day so that she could regain her smile. And I'm sure I'll be able to continue doing what I can in the future."

As he said this, a slight shift of the lights made the shadows on Berwick's face all the more pronounced.

"For a moment, you looked like nothing but an old man."

"I saw it too, Lady Cicelnia. Someone so old he might just go on to retire."

"What are you talking about?! I still have plenty more in me, especially after being revitalized from looking at her!"

"W-Well, that's fine..."

Cicelnia and Lettie gave Berwick a sidelong glance, as he clenched his fist and held back tears.

"Don't you think you're being delusional? Before long, people will be calling you a crazy old grandpa!"

"Urgh... I believe I know how to behave properly. Besides, Alus wouldn't say that!"

"I understand that you are single and without children... but going this far is not normal."

"Right. By the way, Allie is training this... Alice, is that right? And it looks like you've been preparing for this shoot since she enrolled at the Institute. That just borders on madness!"

Berwick simply shook his head, as if to say that they still had a long way to go.

Incidentally, even after Berwick retired, he would still have money left over to give Alice financial aid. Not having much to spend it on, he'd amassed a decent fortune. And his way of doting wasn't much different from a grandparent doting on their grandchild.

When she got a boyfriend, it wasn't hard to imagine Berwick launching a thorough investigation into him, and fiercely protesting any dating, even going so far as to scheme to sabotage the relationship.

Even if he didn't, there was the concern that he would eventually stick his nose where it didn't belong. Not to mention he was the military leader of an entire nation.

Cicelnia suppressed a shudder, and decided to press her point. "Do try to avoid any scandals, will you? It would have repercussions for me as well."

"Now that's rude... Lady Cicelnia, it seems you're misunderstanding me..."

"Still, isn't it pretty complicated? What are you going to do about that?"

"About what?"

"This Alice girl is going to become a Magicmaster, right? Which means that she'll eventually join the military."

"It is indeed a complicated feeling. But it's the path that she decided on her own. I will simply watch over her, and give her a slight push if need be." Despite Berwick's age, his back was straight, and he looked like the model soldier, with almost a philosophical look to him.

However—

"Your legs are shaking, Governor-General."

"I knew you were getting old. There's a certain melancholy hanging in the air..."

Berwick was left astonished as the two young women took turns having a go at him.

## **Drinks Under the Night Sky**

It might be the perfect time for some reminiscing...

Her reddish brown hair had soaked in water, and she waited for it to dry naturally. Water droplets splashed as she casually ran her fingers through her hair.

Having retired to her assigned room in Balmes' military headquarters, Lettie was taking a well-earned break after returning from her mission. The large room was not much different from a top class hotel room.

After wiping down her body, Lettie rested a towel on her shoulders, walking around the room in bare feet. Unusually for her, she hadn't fully dried her hair and was wearing a thin night shirt.

The shirt was wet and sticking to her, and her white skin could be seen through it. However, there was only one other person in the room, so there was no fear of anyone from the other nations seeing her.

Her usual braid was undone with her hair hanging against her back. She wasn't in a particularly bad mood, but to outsiders her stiff expression would look like she had failed to get enough sleep.

She restlessly moved towards the balcony. Walking out onto it, she leaned against the exquisitely made white railing. The gentle wind rustled her hair.

There were some things that she wasn't satisfied with, and some anger she couldn't take out on anyone, causing deep wrinkles in her forehead.

That was when a voice that seemed to have picked up on that called out from behind her, "You look like you have a lot you want to say, Lady Lettie."

"I guess I made you worry, Ms. Rinne."

"Not at all," Rinne said, shaking her head. Her hair was bundled up and she'd changed into some rather plain clothes. She seemed to have been extra sensitive to Lettie's state, as she even brought out refreshments.

There were two glasses with fruity drinks. The perfect drink to enjoy under a night sky. After picking up one of the glasses, Lettie put it against her lips and poured it down her throat as if to extinguish her burning red cheeks. "Hm? Is this..."

"Oh, are you not good with alcohol? There's only a little mixed in, so it's not as strong as fruit wine."

"I don't mind. I was just thinking of how I was causing trouble for you," Lettie said with a small smile on her face.

Rinne had indeed shown some consideration for her, but it wasn't something she was too bothered by. She was more worried over being so open with a Single. But they were both women here. It was only natural she would be tempted to have a chat under the night sky with a drink in hand. "... Is it about Sir Alus?"



"More or less. I guess you're right on the mark, really. Anyways, I'm not going to start talking even if you get me drunk."

"T-That's not what I intended. It's just... it doesn't feel real. Like I still can't believe it."

"Same here. Everyone else on the squad probably feels the same way. But this kind of thing happens all the time. Magicmasters or not, we're just pawns on the board. But Allie is different. There's replacements for the ruler, and the Governor-General... and me. But not for Allie."

Rinne timidly asked her, "Because he's the ranked No. 1...?"

"Because he's in a league of his own. I more or less knew that before, but I felt that all the more strongly this time around. Say that a Fiend, far stronger than anything we've ever fought in the past, appears."

"That would be a disaster," Rinne nodded.

"Nations would be destroyed, Magicmasters would die, as well as the citizens they fought to protect. So would the rulers and Governor-Generals."

Lettie spoke in a serious tone, and Rinne imagined the situation. The realization gradually sank in and a creeping chill ran down her spine as she gulped, forgetting that she had a drink in her hand.

"No matter how strong they might be, everyone would die. Doubles and Singles alike. I'm sure I would too. But Allie alone would survive. Even if humanity died out, he would be able to survive all on his own." Lettie casually said this as if simply stating obvious facts.

"..." Sensing that the atmosphere was getting a little too heavy, Rinne tried to change the topic. Lettie wanted to speak of Alus' value, and it was also the source of her frustration. But right now, all Rinne was after was some casual chatting between two adults. She had no intentions of digging too deep.

So she tried to enjoy the setting, and took a sip of her drink. "By the way, Lady Lettie, would you like to share an old story about Sir Alus?"

"So a little snack to go with the drinks... or maybe something more than that?"

"No, I meant nothing by it... Why does everyone try to set me up!" Rinne's cheeks were twitching. She'd asked a casual question, but somehow ended up having it turned against her. She wasn't too happy about it, but she still listened to what Lettie had to say.

"That's fine. As Cicelnia's aide it might be better for you to know more about Allie," Lettie said. "Allie was so cute when he was little. Oh, and when I say little, I mean that he's always been the same, just smaller. And his eyes were more dead than they are now. But that's what got the unmarried women going."

That wasn't the kind of talk Rinne expected to come from Lettie's mouth, but it was more in line with what she had hoped for, so all the better. Their discussion got more heated as they got into it.



Quite a while later, their unexpectedly passionate discussion was finally starting to die down. "Still... you sure do get excited when you talk about Sir Alus... is that because of love?"

With a childish smile on her face, Lettie held her empty glass upside down to get the last of the drink out of it. "I do think about that from time to time. There's even a picture of the two of us inside my license case that was taken in celebration when I became a Single."

Rinne restrained her urge to ask to see it, and asked a simple question instead. It might turn into another long discussion, but she didn't want to throw a damper on the current topic. Status or rank had no place here. This was just simple girl talk. "Lady Lettie... what was the trigger that made you realize how you felt for Sir Alus?"

Lettie's smile became bigger as she seemed to recall something, but she put a finger against her lips. "That's a secret. If we ever get another chance like this, maybe I'll share it over some drinks under the night sky..."

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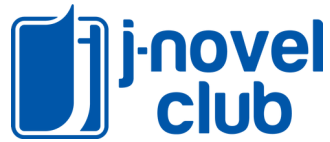
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 7

by Izushiro

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